Toaru Majutsu no Index

In my own room, a pure white sister had suddenly come falling from the sky.

"It's not possible..."

Kamijou Touma had muttered, but this young lady with quite an appearance had this to say, "I had escaped from the world of magic and came here."

Here, where supernatural powers are recognized as an ordinary science, in the anti-occult Academy City.

Kamijou doubted the speech and conduct of this mysterious young lady who had called herself Index, when in front of both of them a magician had really appeared!

Thus presenting this anticipated school action story of a newcomer!

か-12-1

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）

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Kamachi Kazuma

A new author hoping to take the most unmotivated author picture in the world. He wants to draw attention by telling the photographer about his stupid hope, turning it into a stare down contest. Ah, perhaps using a psychology book or something to analyze the picture above might be interesting.

(Product of Dengeki Bunko)

Toaru Majutsu no Index

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

Born on September 7, 1973. Loves stupid movies and sweet things. Since he has a gloomy personality, in times where a cheerful picture is needed, he gets distressed since he is not prepared to be cheerful and ends up drawing a gloomy picture.

カバー／あかつきBP

とある魔術の禁書目録
インデックス

鎌池和馬
イラスト／灰村キヨタカ

“...I’m hungry.”

Mysterious girl in white — **Index**

“Whoa, whoa...”

High school student of Academy City — **Kamijou Touma**

"...Oh, it's the Biri Biri middle schooler again."
"It's your fault for pissing me off."
Student of Tokiwadai Middle School in Academy City — Misaka Mikoto

“Do you want to save Index?”

“Why do you insist on this futile—!”

Magician — **Stiyl Magnus**

“What!? How can she even use magic...!?”

Magician — **Kanzaki Kaori**

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"Okay?"

Kamijou Touma's homeroom teacher — **Tsukuyomi Komoe**

Toaru Majutsu no Index

とある魔術の禁書目録

インデックス

Kamachi Kazuma

鎌池和馬

イラスト・灰村キヨタカ

Haimura Kiyotaka

デザイン・渡邊宏一

Translators

Js06 - Full Volume

PROLOGUE

The Tale of the Boy Who Could Kill Illusions.

The_Imagine-Breaker.

"Ahh! Shit! Shit! God damn it! This is just too much misfortune!!"

Even as he realized his cries sounded rather strange, Kamijou Touma showed no sign of stopping his tremendous flight.

As he ran through back alleys late at night, he glanced over his shoulder.

There were eight of them.

He ran frantically all over for almost two kilometers, but there were still eight of them. Of course, Kamijou Touma had no way to win in a fight against that many unless he happened to be a former foreign unit's cook or a cyber-ninja that had survived to the present day. In a fight between high school students, anything beyond one-on-three was out of the question. That could be called "impossible" even before taking any skill he might have had into account.

Kamijou kicked over a filthy plastic bucket and frightened off a black cat as he continued running.

It was July 19.

The fault lay in that date. Because summer vacation would start the next day, he was in such high spirits that he grabbed a manga at the bookstore despite a glance at the cover telling him it was no good, entered a family restaurant to treat himself, for once, to a nice between-meals snack, found a middle school-aged girl surrounded by clearly drunk delinquents, and decided that some rescuing was in order.

But, he had not expected more of their comrades to come swarming out of the bathroom.

He had always thought that going to the bathroom in groups was something only girls did.

"I had to run out before the hellish Goya and escargot lasagna I ordered even arrived. I didn't even get to eat anything, but I'm being treated like a dine-and-dasher. What kind of misfortune is this!? Gyahh!!"

Kamijou scratched his head as he ran out from the back alley and into the moonlit street.

Even if Academy City were as large as a third of Tokyo, he could see nothing but couples no matter where he looked. That was also surely because it was July 19. It's all July 19's fault!, Kamijou, who was single, shouted in his heart. The three blades of the wind turbines located here and there throughout the area glittered in the pale moonlight and the lights of the city nightscape, making them look like the tears of rich bachelors.

Kamijou sliced through the night, tearing couples apart.

He glanced down at his right hand as he ran. The power that resided there would be of no help in the current situation. It would not let him defeat even a single delinquent, it would not raise his scores on tests, and it would not make him popular with girls.

"Uuh...Such misfortune!"

If he escaped the group of delinquents, they would have possibly used their phones to call in reinforcements and bikes. In order to simply run down their stamina, Kamijou Touma had been letting them catch occasional glimpses of him as bait so that they would continue to run and wear themselves out.

It was basically a boxer's rope-a-dope strategy, letting an opponent punch himself out until his stamina was drained.

Kamijou's goal was only to save any possible victims.

If he could lose them and have them give up without getting into a fistfight, he would win.

Incidentally, Kamijou had confidence in his long distance running. His pursuers, on the other hand, had already ruined their bodies with alcohol and cigarettes, and the boots they were wearing weren't made for sprinting. On top of that, running full speed for long distances without pacing one's self was impossible by its very nature.

As Kamijou alternated and weaved in and out through roads and back alleys while seemingly simply clumsily running about in a panic, he saw one and then another of the delinquents drop out of the chase, leaning forward with their hands on their knees. He felt his plan was the perfect way of resolving the situation without any injuries.

"D-damn it. Why do I have to waste my youth on this stuff!?"

Everywhere he looked, he saw nothing but couples full of dreams and happiness. Unable to stand it, Kamijou Touma felt as if he had somehow ended up on the short end of life. The date need only change and it would be summer vacation and yet he had neither love nor comedy to speak of.

It made him feel like quite the loser.

He then heard one of the delinquents shouting from behind him.

“Hey!! You fucking brat! Stop, you master runner!!”

It only angered Kamijou more to receive such a violent love call.

“Shut up! You should be thanking me for not turning around and knocking you and your monkey-level IQ out cold!” Kamijou shouted back despite knowing it was just a waste of stamina.

(He really should thank me for going this far out of my way to keep him from getting injured)

After another two kilometers of sweaty and teary running, he exited the urban area and came to a large river. A large metal bridge spanned the river, about 150 meters across, and no cars could be seen on it. The sturdy iron bridge wasn't even lit up, just blanketed by an eerie darkness reminiscent of the sea at night.

Kamijou glanced back as he darted across the bridge.

He then stopped: at some point, he had escaped all of his pursuers.

“Sh-shit. Did I finally shake them?”

Kamijou desperately suppressed the urge to sit down right then and there and sighed as he stared up into the night sky.

He had actually managed to resolve everything without having to punch anyone. He wanted to praise himself for that.

“Really now, what are you doing? Do you think protecting those delinquents makes you a good person? Are you some overzealous teacher?”

In an instant, Kamijou’s body froze over.

Because the bridge had no lights, Kamijou had not noticed the girl standing about five meters ahead in the direction he had been running, a completely normal middle school girl wearing a gray pleated skirt, a short-sleeved blouse, and a summer sweater. Kamijou stared up into the sky and seriously considered collapsing onto his back. The girl before him was the same one from the family restaurant.

“Wait, so that's why they stopped chasing me?”

“Yeah. They annoyed me, so I roasted them.”

The zapping sound of bluish-white sparks echoed. Rather than a stun gun, as her shoulder-length brown hair swayed, sparks flew from it like an electrode.

The moment a convenience store bag in the wind passed by her head, it was blown away by bluish-white sparks reminiscent of an interception device.

“Ugh,” sighed Kamijou wearily.

July 19. That was why he had grabbed a manga at the bookstore despite a glance at the cover telling him it was no good, entered a family restaurant to treat himself, for once, to a nice between-meals snack, found a middle school-aged girl surrounded by clearly drunk delinquents, and decided that some rescuing was in order.

However, Kamijou had not a single thought about rescuing the girl. Instead, had tried to rescue the boys who had carelessly approached her.

Once again he sighed. The girl was always like that. He had seen her here and there sporadically for almost a month, but they had yet to learn each other’s names. In other words, they were by no means friends.

She was the one always coming up to him all haughty, saying she'd reduce him to a heap of trash, and Kamijou's job was to shrug it off. Without a single exception, it went that way and he won every time.

If he actually lost, the girl would likely be satisfied, but Kamijou was a terrible actor. He once tried to fake his defeat and she chased him like a demon for the rest of the night.

“...What did I even do?”

“I cannot allow anyone to be more powerful than me. That is enough of a reason.”

That was how it was with her. He felt that even a character in a fighting game would have a more detailed incentive.

“But you’re treating me like an idiot, too. I’m a Level 5. Do you really think I would go all out against a powerless Level 0? I do know how to handle the weak.”

This city, unlike others, didn't follow the traditional scenario where street thugs were the toughest. Those delinquents who could not keep up with the esper powers development Curriculum were Level 0s, the powerless.

The truly strong in that city, the top-tier students, were espers.

“Yeah, about that, I do understand that you possess a talent that only 1 in 328,571 have. I really do. But if you want to live a long life, you should stop speaking to people so condescendingly.”

“Shut up. If you couldn’t bend a single spoon after having various crazy things done to you like have drugs injected directly into your blood vessels or have electrodes stabbed in through your ears and into the brain, what could it be but lack of talent?”

“...”

That was indeed the kind of place Academy City was.

Academy City's other face was somewhere that Brain Development—using more palatable names like Mnemonics or Memorization Techniques—was quietly included in the Curriculum.

However, not all of the 2.3 million students living in Academy City had ceased to be human and became something like a manga protagonist.

Just under sixty percent of the whole population were utterly useless Level 0s who could only bend a spoon after focusing their brain to the point their blood vessels burst.

“If I need to bend a spoon, I can just use pliers, and if I need fire, I can just buy a cheap lighter. Also, what do I need telepathy for when I have a cell phone? Are esper powers really that great?”

Those were the words of Kamijou who had been branded as useless by Academy City’s physical examination sensors.

“And everyone’s priorities are all messed up. They’re all rejoicing over the byproduct we call esper powers, but isn’t our real objective something beyond that?”

In response, the girl who was one of Academy City’s seven Level 5s twisted the edges of her lips.

“Hahh? ...Oh, that. What was it again? Something like, ‘Humans cannot calculate god, so we need to acquire a body that exceeds humanity before we can arrive at god's answer’, right?” She snickered. “Hah. Don’t make me laugh. What is all this about the ‘brain of god’? Have you heard about the supposed military Sisters created based on an analysis of my DNA map? It seems to me these lucrative side effects are more important than that objective.”

After saying that, the girl suddenly stopped.

In the silence, it felt as if the quality of the air was changing.

"...Well. That's what strong people *would* say, isn't it?"

“Huh?”

“The strong, the strong, the strong. Those are the fearless and cruel words of a manga protagonist who was born with his abilities and does not understand the pain of arriving there on his own.”

The river below the bridge began to make an unsettling amount of noise.

A dark flame could be felt on the grit of her words that hinted at just how much of her humanity she had abandoned to arrive at the position of one of Academy City’s seven Level 5s.

Kamijou denied all of it with just a few words. Not even once did he turn around.

He did this by never losing.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait! Take a look at the results of the annual physical examination. I’m a Level 0 and you’re a Level 5. Ask anyone you find out on the streets, and they’ll tell you who’s stronger!”

Academy City’s esper development heavily used things such as pharmaceutics, neuroscience, and cerebral physiology. It was a purely scientific endeavor. After undergoing the Curriculum to a certain extent, one could bend a spoon even without talent.

And yet Kamijou Touma could do nothing.

Academy City’s measurement instruments had verified a complete *lack* of talent in him.

“Zero, you say,” repeated the girl as if she was turning it over in her mouth. She stuck a hand in her skirt pocket and pulled out an arcade coin. “Have you ever heard the term Railgun?”

“Hm?”

“It's some sort of battleship weapon that fires metal shells using superpowered electromagnets. The principle's the same as a linear motor train.”

The girl flicked the coin up into the air with her thumb. The coin rotated a few times before landing back onto her thumb.

“It's apparently something like this.”

Just as she spoke, an orange spear of light suddenly and silently shot past Kamijou’s head. It was more like a laser than a spear. He could only tell it had originated from the girl’s thumb because the afterimage of light stretched back to it.

Almost like thunder, the noise rumbled in with a slight delay. As a shockwave tore through the air around his ears, Kamijou's sense of balance was thrown off. He staggered and glanced over his shoulder.

The instant the orange light struck the road surface on the bridge, the asphalt was blown away like an airplane making an emergency landing on the ocean. Even after travelling a thirty-meter path of utter destruction and stopping, the orange afterglow was still burning the air like an afterimage.

"Even a coin like this can be quite powerful when it's fired at three times the speed of sound. Of course, the coin melts after fifty meters because of air friction."

That bridge made of steel and concrete swayed like an unreliable suspension bridge. Failing metal bolts could be heard occasionally.

"...!!"

Kamijou felt a chill, as if someone had thrown dry ice in his blood vessels.

He felt like all the moisture in his body had been turned to sweat and evaporated.

"Damn you. Don't tell me you used that to drive them away!!"

"Don't be stupid. I match my methods to my opponent. I don't want to become a homicidal maniac." As she spoke, sparks flew from the girl's brown hair like an electrode. "This was enough for those Level 0s!"

Bluish-white sparks flew from the girl's bangs like a horn and a spear-like line of lightning flew towards Kamijou.

There was no way to evade. After all, he was up against a bluish-white lightning spear shot from a Level 5's hair. It was an experience like watching a thundercloud fire a bolt at light speed and then trying to dodge it.

An explosive noise followed after a slight delay.

Kamijou immediately held up his right hand to protect his face and the lightning spear struck it. It rampaged through Kamijou's body and sparks scattered in every direction and into the bridge's steel framework.

...Or so it had seemed.

"So, why are you completely unhurt?"

Her words seemed lighthearted enough, but the girl baring her canines was glaring at Kamijou.

The high voltage current that had scattered into the surroundings had been powerful enough to burn the steel framework of the bridge, yet, Kamijou's right hand had not been blown off by the direct hit. ...In fact, it lacked even a single burn.

Kamijou's right hand had erased the girl's electrical strike that numbered a few hundred million volts.

"Honestly, what's with you? That power of yours isn't listed in Academy City's Bank. If I'm a one in 328,571 genius, then you're a one in 2,300,000 disaster,"[1] the girl muttered in annoyance but Kamijou neglected to give even a single word in response. "If I pick a fight with an exception like that, I might be able to raise my level, don't you think?"

"...But you always lose."

He received a response in the form of more lightning that shot from her forehead, well over Mach 1 at that.

However, it scattered in every direction the instant it met Kamijou's right hand.

It was very much like a water balloon bursting.

That was Kamijou Touma's Imagine Breaker.

Esper powers ranged from the ones mocked on TV to the ones established with numerical formulas in Academy City. Anything using that kind of supernatural power, even if it were part of God's system, would be negated without question by that supernatural power of his.[2]

As it was supernatural in origin, even that girl's Railgun ability was no exception.

However, Kamijou's Imagine Breaker only worked on the supernatural power itself. Simply, he could negate an esper's fireball, but he was still vulnerable to the concrete shards broken by the fireball. Also, the effective range was only his right hand and wrist. If the fireball hit him anywhere else, he would be burned.

And yet...

(I really, really thought I was going to die there! Kyaahhh!!)

Kamijou Touma's calm and composed expression stiffened awkwardly. Even with a right hand that could completely negate those light-speed lightning spears, it was sheer coincidence that they struck his right hand.

---

[1] Genius and disaster are both pronounced "tensai" in Japanese.

[2] The word "system" is written with the base kanji for the word "miracle". So the sentence literally implies that God's miracles are being negated.

His heart was pounding in his chest as he desperately tried to force a mature smile onto his face.

“I guess you could say that was either some misfortune or you’re just unlucky.”

That was how Kamijou brought that day, July 19, to an end.

With just one comment, he seemed to be lamenting everything in the world.

“You just really aren’t lucky at all.”

CHAPTER 1

The Magician Lands on the Tower.

FAIR,_Occasionally_GIRL.

Part 1

"If you're an Aquarius, born between January 20 and February 18, you will have extremely good fortune in love, money, and business! No matter how improbably the circumstances, only good things are headed your way. Go buy a lottery ticket! But no matter how popular you may be, don't try dating three or four girls at the same time. ♪"

"...Y'know, I knew it would be something like this, but still."

It was July 20, the first day of summer vacation.

Kamijou Touma was at a loss for words. His dorm room in Academy City was ruled by a boiling heat due to a broken air conditioner. Apparently, lightning had struck during the night and taken out eighty percent of the electrical appliances. That also meant the contents of his fridge had been wiped out. When he had tried to eat the cup of yakisoba he kept as emergency rations, he spilled the noodles all over the sink. With no other option, he decided to eat out, but he stepped on and broke his ATM card while searching for his wallet. When he spitefully crawled back into bed to cry himself to sleep, he had been awakened by his ringing phone. It was his homeroom teacher conveying a heartfelt message: "Good morning, Kamijou-chan, you're an idiot, so you need supplementary lessons. ♪"

He had always felt that horoscopes given on TV like weather forecasts tended to be just that, forecasts, but he was unable to laugh it off when it was that far off.

"...I really do get it. But I can't fully grasp it without saying it out loud."

The horoscope was always wrong and Kamijou had never encountered a true good luck charm. That was simply everyday life for Kamijou Touma. He had thought the fantastic extent to which luck deserted him ran in the family, but his father had won fourth prize (about 100,000 yen) in a lottery and his mother had scored free drinks from the vending machine jackpot multiple times. It was enough to make him wonder if they were even related by blood. But as he wasn't harboring a crush on his little sister and wasn't in line

for royal succession, no good would've come of discovering that he wasn't his parents' son.

To sum it up, Kamijou Touma experienced nothing but misfortune.

It was to the extent that it could pretty much be called a running gag at that point.

But he had no intention of just lazing around because of that.

Kamijou did not rely on luck. In other words, he had a lot of drive.

"...Now then. The immediate problems are my card and the fridge."

Kamijou scratched his head and looked around his room. As long as he had his bankbook, he could get a new card easily enough. The real problem was the fridge... or rather, breakfast. They called it supplementary lessons, but he was sure to be forced to take Methuselin pills and Elbrase powder for the sake of esper development. Doing that on an empty stomach would not be a good idea.

As he changed out of the T-shirt he wore instead of pajamas and into his summer uniform, Kamijou considered stopping by a convenience store on the way to school. Living up to his position as an idiot student, Kamijou had been pointlessly staying up all night as summer break approached, so a grating pain was running through his sleep-deprived head. However, he forced himself to think positively.

(Making up for four months' worth of cut classes in a single week is a pretty sweet deal.)

His mood rebounded to the extent that he suddenly muttered, "The weather sure is nice. Maybe I should air out my futon."

Kamijou then opened the screen door to the balcony. He expected the futon to be nice and fluffy once he got back from his supplementary lessons.

But on that seventh floor balcony, the wall of the neighboring building was less than two meters away.

"The sky is so blue, and yet the future is pitch black. ♪"

His spirits dropped sharply. Forcing himself to say it cheerfully only had the opposite effect.

Having no one around to act as the straight man only tormented him with a feeling of loneliness as he used both hands to grab the futon on his bed.

(Failing all else, I have to at least get this nice and fluffy.)

Just as he had that thought, he felt something soft squish under his foot. He looked down to find a yakisoba bread still in its plastic wrapping. It had been in the aforementioned ruined refrigerator, so it had surely gone bad.

"...I just hope it doesn't suddenly start raining this evening."

Voicing a sudden bad premonition he had, Kamijou headed out the opened screen door and to the balcony...

...and spotted a white futon already hanging there.

"?"

It may have been a school dorm room, but the layout was exactly like a one-room apartment, so Kamijou lived alone. As such, there was no one besides Kamijou Touma who would be hanging a futon over the railing of his room's balcony.

When he looked closer, it was not a futon hanging there at all.

It was a girl wearing white clothes.

"Huh!?"

The real futon fell from his hands.

It was a mystery. In fact, it was nonsensical. As if she had exhaustedly collapsed across a metal rod, a girl had her waist pressed up against the balcony railing and her body bent such that her arms and legs were dangling straight down.

Her age was... about fourteen or fifteen. She looked a year or two younger than Kamijou. She must have been a foreigner because her skin was pure white and her hair was white... no, silver. Her hair was rather long, so it completely covered her upside down head, hiding her face from view. Kamijou guessed it must have gone down to her waist normally.

And her clothes were...

"Whoa, it's a real sister... The nun kind, not the sibling kind."

Was habit the term for what she wore? It was that outfit you expected to see on a nun in a church. Her clothes looked a bit like a long dress that reached her ankles, and she wore a one-piece hood over her head that was a bit different from a hat. However, while normal nun's habits were jet black, hers was pure white. Was it made of silk? Also, at all the important points of the outfit, embroideries made of golden thread had been sewn in. Kamijou could not believe how much the impression given by the exact same design of clothes could change just by altering the coloring. What he saw reminded him of a nouveau riche teacup.

The girl's lovely fingertips twitched.

Her head slowly rose from its hanging down position. Her silk-like silver hair smoothly split to either side like a curtain and the girl's face appeared from between the long, long hair.

(Whoa, whoa...!)

The girl's face was relatively cute. Her white skin and green eyes were a new experience for someone with overseas skill level of exactly zero like Kamijou, and she somehow seemed like a doll to him.

However, that was not what had left Kamijou so flustered.

She was a foreigner and Kamijou Touma's English teacher had suggested he take up a lifelong policy of avoiding foreigners. If someone from some strange country suddenly started talking on and on to him, he would likely end up buying a down comforter without even realizing it.

"I..."

The girl's cute but slightly dried lips slowly moved.

Kamijou took a step or two back without even thinking. With a squish, he stepped on the yakisoba bread once more.

"I'm hungry."

"....."

For an instant, Kamijou thought he was so stupid that his mind had automatically substituted the foreign language he had heard with Japanese. Something like how stupid elementary school kids would give ridiculous lyrics to songs they didn't know the real lyrics to.

"I'm hungry."

"..."

"I'm hungry."

"....."

"How many times do I have to tell you that I'm hungry?"

The silver-haired girl seemed to get a little mad at how Kamijou just stood there frozen.

(No. That settles it. This can't be anything other than Japanese.)

"Ah, umm..." he said as he stared at the girl draped over the balcony railing. "What? Are you trying to say you collapsed from exhaustion or something?"

"You could also say I have collapsed and am about to die."

"..."

The girl could speak Japanese really well.

"It would be great if you could feed me enough food to fill me up."

Kamijou looked down at the squished and likely spoiled yakisoba bread still in its wrapper at his feet.

He had no idea what was going on, but he knew he would be better off not getting involved. In the hopes of getting the girl happily off to some distant place, he stuck the squished yakisoba bread up to her mouth. He was sure she would run off once she caught a whiff of the sour smell, so he meant is as something similar to chazuke being given to a guest one wanted to leave in Kyoto.[3]

"Thank you. And it's time to eat."

Her mouth engulfed it, wrapping and all. And Kamijou's hand for that matter.

Once again, Kamijou's day began with misfortune and a scream.

Part 2

"I suppose I need to start with an introduction."

"Actually, I would rather you started with explaining why you were hanging there."

"My name is Index."

"That's clearly a fake name! What do you mean Index!? Are you a table of contents or something!?"

"As you can see, I am from the Church. That is important. Oh, but I'm not from the Vatican. I'm from the Anglican Church."

[3] When a Kyoto native asks if a guest wants to eat chazuke, it may really mean that the person has overstayed and is being politely asked to leave.

“Hello? Hello? Just what kind of alien am I talking to?”

Kamijou did not understand so he dug his finger inside his ear, and Index chewed on her thumbnail. Was that a habit of hers?

Kamijou wondered why they were politely sitting there facing each other from across a glass table like they were in a marriage interview.

If he did not leave soon, he would be late for his supplementary lessons, but he could hardly leave this strange person in his room. To make matters worse, the mysterious silver-haired girl calling herself Index seemed to have taken a liking to the room to the extent that she seemed willing to laze about on the floor.

Had Kamijou’s misfortune called her here? He seriously hoped not.

“Anyways, it would be great if you could feed me enough food to fill me up.”

“Why would I do that!? I don’t want to raise your parameter. I’d rather die than activate some strange flag and end up stuck on the Index route!!”

“Um... is that slang? I’m sorry, but I have no idea what you are saying.”

As expected of a foreigner, she did not understand Japan’s otaku culture.

“But if I leave now, I will collapse three steps from the door.”

“...Don’t give me that collapsing nonsense.”

“And I will draw up my last remaining strength to leave a dying message. It will be a picture of you.”

“Wha—?”

“And if someone happens to save me, I will tell them I was imprisoned in this room and tormented to the point that I collapsed. ...I’ll tell them you forced your cosplaying tastes on me.”

“Don’t you dare say that! And you do know a thing or two about otaku culture, don’t you!?”

“?”

She tilted her head to the side like a kitten seeing itself in a mirror for the first time.

He regretted letting her get a rise out of him. He felt like he alone had been somehow horribly sullied.

(Okay, let's do this!)

Kamijou noisily headed toward the kitchen. Only spoiled trash was left inside the fridge, so it would not hurt his wallet to feed it to her. He figured it would be fine if it was heated. He dumped everything left into a frying pan and made something similar to stir-fried vegetables.

(Come to think of it, where did this girl come from?)

Of course, there were foreigners in Academy City. However, she did not have the characteristic "scent" of a resident. But it was also strange for someone to come in from outside.

Academy City was treated like a city made up of hundreds of schools, but it was more accurate to think of it as a city-sized boarding school. It was large enough to cover a third of Tokyo, but it was surrounded by a wall like the Great Wall of China. It was not as strict as a prison, but it was still not a place you could just wander into.

...Or so it was made to look. In reality, three satellites launched for experiments by a technical college were constantly monitoring the city. Everyone going in or out of the city was completely scanned and if any suspicious person who did not match the records at the gate was found, either Anti-Skill or members of Judgment from all the schools would immediately head there.

(But that electrical girl called in that thundercloud yesterday. That may have hidden her from the satellites.)

"So why were you hanging out to dry on my balcony?" Kamijou asked the girl as he put soy sauce on the stir-fried vegetables-like dish he was making with purely ill intentions.

"I wasn't hanging out to dry."

"Then what were you doing? Did the wind blow you here or something?"

"...Something like that."

Kamijou had meant it as a joke and stopped moving the frying pan as he turned around to face the girl.

"I fell. I was trying to jump from rooftop to rooftop."

(Rooftop?)

Kamijou looked up at the ceiling.

Cheap student dorms lined the area. More of the same type of eight-story building were lined up and one glance out to the balcony showed there was a gap of two meters between buildings. It was true that a running jump could get you from one rooftop to the other, but...

“But that’s eight stories high? One wrong step and you’d be headed straight to hell.”

“Yeah, you don’t even get a grave if you commit suicide,” said Index cryptically. “But I had no choice. I had no other way to escape.”

“Escape?”

Kamijou frowned at that ominous word.

“Yeah,” said Index like a child. “I was being chased.”

“...”

Kamijou’s hand shaking the hot frying pan stopped moving once more.

“I made my jump just fine, but I was shot in the back in midair.” The girl naming herself Index seemed to be smiling. “Sorry. It seems I got caught on your balcony as I fell.”

She gave a pure smile in Kamijou Touma’s direction without even a hint of self-deprecation or sarcasm.

“You were shot...?”

“Yeah? Oh, you don’t need to worry about a wound. These clothes also function as a defensive barrier.”

What did she mean by a defensive barrier? Was it a bulletproof vest?

The girl spun around as if to show off new clothes and she certainly did not look injured. Kamijou had to wonder if she had really been shot. The idea that she was delusional or making it all up seemed more realistic.

But...

The fact remained that she had indeed been hanging from his seventh story balcony.

If, hypothetically, everything she was saying were true...

Who had she been shot by?

Kamijou thought.

He thought about just how determined one would have to be to between the rooftops of an eight-story building. He also considered how lucky she was to be caught on his seventh-story balcony. And he thought about the hidden meaning to the fact that she had collapsed.

She had said she was being chased.

He thought about the meaning of the smile on Index's face when she said that.

Kamijou did not know what circumstances Index was in and he had not understood what the few things she had told him meant. Most likely, he would only understand half of it if Index explained everything from start to finish and he would likely have no idea how to even start to understand the other half.

Nonetheless, one truth remained.

With a tightening in his chest, he understood the fact that she had gotten caught on his seventh story balcony when one wrong step could have sent her straight to the asphalt below.

"Food."

Index poked her head in from behind Kamijou. Despite speaking Japanese, she must not have been used to chopsticks because she was holding them in her fist like a spoon while staring excitedly into the frying pan.

Her eyes were like those of a kitten taken from a cardboard box in the rain.

".....Ah."

Kamijou had put the food that was nothing more than trash into the frying pan to make something like (poisonous) stir-fried vegetables.

For some reason, the Angel Kamijou inside him (that usually came along with the Devil Kamijou) was writhing horribly at the sight of the starving girl.

"Ahh! I-I know! If you're really that hungry, how about we go to a proper family restaurant rather than give you this horrible meal made by a guy with the leftovers!? We can even get it delivered!"

"I can't wait that long."

"....Ah...kh!"

“And it isn’t horrible. You made this food for me without charging anything. It has to be good.”

For the first time, she gave a shining, nun-like smile.

Kamijou's stomach felt like it was being wrung out like a mop. Index ignored him, taking the chopsticks in her fist and scooping the contents of the pan into her mouth.

Munch munch.

“See? It’s good.”

“...Oh, is it?”

Chomp chomp.

“It’s nice how you added that sour flavor to help get my strength back.”

“Geh! It’s sour!?”

“Munch munch.

“Yeah, but that’s fine. Thanks. You’re like a big brother or something.”

She gave a large grin. She was eating with such a pure heart that she had a bean sprout on her cheek.

“...Gh...Uuwhaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh!”

At the speed of sound, Kamijou grabbed the frying pan. Index looked incredibly displeased, but Kamijou swore in his heart that he would be the only one to fall down to hell.

“Are you hungry too?”

“...Huh?”

“If not, I’d rather you let me eat the rest.”

When Kamijou saw Index looking at him with slightly upturned eyes while chewing on the end of the chopsticks, Kamijou received a divine revelation.

God was telling him to take responsibility and eat it himself.

This had nothing to do with misfortune. He had completely brought it on himself.

Part 3

Kamijou Touma stuffed his mouth full of the heated garbage and grinned.

“Mhh,” said the girl naming herself Index with a look of complaint on her face as she gnawed on a biscuit. The way she held the small biscuit in both hands made her look a bit like a squirrel.

“Okay, you said you were being chased. Chased by whom?”

Having returned from Nirvana, Kamijou once again asked about the biggest issue in her story.

He was not about to follow a girl he had met less than thirty minutes ago down to the depths of hell. However, it was likely already too late for nothing at all to happen.

(So in the end, I have to go with fox words,) thought Kamijou using his personal term for pretending to be nice.

He knew it would not resolve anything, but he still wanted to comfort himself by feeling like he had done *something*.

“Hmm...” she said with a slightly dry throat. “Now who was it? Maybe it was the Rosicrucians or S∴M∴ aka Stella Matutina. I think it was some group like that, but I don’t know their name yet. ...They aren’t the type to find meaning in names.”

“They?” Kamijou asked meekly.

Apparently, she was being chased by a group or organization.

“Yes,” said Index surprisingly calmly. “A magic society.”

.....

“Hah? Magic? Hah? What!? That’s crazy!!”

“Eh? Huh? W-was my Japanese weird there? I mean magic. A magic cabal.”[4]

“...” Hearing it in English did not exactly help. “What, what? Are you talking about some dangerous cult that says anyone who doesn’t believe in the cult’s leader will receive divine punishment and then gives you LSD to brainwash you? That’s bad in more ways than one.”

“...Are you making fun of me?”

[4] Magic society was spoken in Japanese while magic cabal was spoken in English.

"...Sorry, I just can't. I can't accept magic. I may know all sorts of supernatural powers like Pyrokinesis and Clairvoyance, but I just can't accept magic."

"...?"

Index looked confused.

She had likely expected a believer in only science to deny that any kind of strange thing could exist in the world.

However, Kamijou's right hand held a supernatural power.

It was named Imagine Breaker and it could negate even the systems of god seen in myths in a single strike so long as it was a supernatural power that exceeded the ordinary.

"Esper powers are pretty common here. Anyone's brain can be 'developed' so the pathways open up by having esperin injected in their veins, electrodes attached to their neck, and certain rhythms played through headphones. It can all be explained with science, so it's only natural to accept it, right?"

"...I don't really get it."

"It's normal! It's completely normal and utterly normal. Is three times enough!?"

"...Then what about magic? Magic is normal."

Index sulked as if someone had insulted her pet cat.

"Umm... Well, take janken for example. Wait, is janken known worldwide?"

"...I think it's called rock-paper scissors where I come from, but I know it."

"Okay, if you played janken ten times in a row and lost each time, would there be a reason behind that?"

"...Mh."

"*There wouldn't, right? But it's human nature to think there is,*" said Kamijou with little interest. "You would think there is no way you would keep losing like that. You would assume there was some rule behind it that you couldn't see. And once you start thinking like that, what happens when you start adding in things like horoscopes?"

"...You mean like, 'if you're a Cancer, then you're unlucky, so you should not attempt any kind of competition'?"

“Right. That is the true identity of the occult. Luck is just us dreaming of these invisible rules. While reality is just something pathetic like a coincidence, our hearts mistake it for some great inevitability. That is the occult.”

For a bit, Index frowned like a displeased cat, but then she said, “So you didn’t just deny it without giving it any thought.”

“Right. *And it is because I gave this serious thought* that I can see why those musty old stories are no good. I can’t believe in some magician from a picture book. If we could raise the dead with the only cost being a bit of MP, no one would be developing these other powers. I just can’t believe in the occult that has no connection to the reality of science.”

He felt that people only saw esper powers as strange and mysterious because they were idiots.

The fact that those powers could be explained scientifically was common knowledge in that city.

“...But magic exists,” said Index as she pouted.

Most likely, that was something like a pillar supporting her heart. Similar to Kamijou’s Imagine Breaker.

“Well, whatever. So why are they chasing you?”

“Magic exists.”

“...”

“Magic exists!”

It seemed she obstinately wanted him to accept it.

“Th-then what is magic? Can you shoot fire from your hands without undergoing our esper Curriculum? If so, I’d like to see it. I might believe you then.”

“I have no magic power, so I can’t use it.”

“...”

Kamijou felt like he had just seen one of those failed espers that said they could not bend a spoon when a camera was present because it distracted them.

All the same, a rather complex feeling filled his chest.

He was insisting that the occult did not exist and that magic was ridiculous, but he really knew nothing about the Imagine Breaker power that resided in his right hand. How did it work and what was going on that he could not see? Academy City was at the peak of the world's esper development, but even its System Scan could not see through his power, so he was labeled as a Level 0.

It was a power he had possessed since birth, not one he had obtained through the Curriculum.

He was insisting the occult did not exist and yet he himself was part of the occult that ignored the rules.

But even so, he was not about to accept the ridiculous reasoning that magic could easily exist just because there were strange things in the world.

"...Magic exists."

Kamijou sighed.

"Okay. *For argument's sake*, let's say magic exists."

"*For argument's sake*?"

"If it does," continued Kamijou, ignoring her. "Why are they after you? Does it have something to do with how you're dressed?"

Kamijou was referring to the extremely extravagant habit Index wore made of pure white silk and embroideries of golden thread. Another way of saying it would be, "Does this have to do with the church?"

"...It is because I am the Index."

"Hah?"

"They are likely after the 103,000 grimoires I have."

.....

"...Once again, I don't understand at all."

"Why do you seem to lose all motivation every time I explain something? Are you a fickle person?"

"Um, let's go back over this. I'm not sure what these grimoires you mentioned are, but the image I have is of a book. Something like a dictionary."

“Yeah. The Book of Eibon, the Lemegeton, Unaussprechlichen Kulten, Cultes des Goules, and the Book of the Dead are good examples. The Necronomicon is so famous there are all sorts of imitations and fakes, so it isn’t very reliable.”

“No, I don’t really care about the contents.”

He wanted to add, “because it’s all a bunch of nonsense anyways”, but he held his tongue.

He instead asked, “So where are these 100,000 books?”

He refused to back down on that. One hundred thousand books were enough to fill an entire library.

“Do you mean you have a key to where they’re stored?”

“No.” Index shook her head. “I have every single one of the 103,000 grimoires with me.”

“Hah?” Kamijou frowned. “Can stupid people just not see them or something?”

“Even if you weren't stupid, you wouldn't be able to see them. What would be the point if you could just look at them whenever you wanted?”

Index’s words were so removed from reality that Kamijou felt like he was being mocked. He glanced around, but he could not see a single musty old book that might be a grimoire. All he saw scattered on the floor were game magazines, manga, and the summer homework he had tossed into a corner.

“...Wahh.”

He had forced himself to listen up until then, but he could not stand it anymore.

He started to wonder if she was merely imagining that she was being chased by someone. If she had jumped from the eighth story rooftop, messed up all on her own, and gotten caught on his balcony all due to a delusion, she was not someone he wanted anything more to do with.

“Believing in esper powers but not in magic makes no sense,” said Index, pouting. “Are those esper powers really all that great? It isn’t right to make fun of people just because you have some kind of special power.”

...

“Well, yeah.” Kamijou gave a small sigh. “I agree. That’s exactly right. It’s wrong to think of yourself as above others just because you can pull off some little trick.”

Kamijou's gaze dropped to his right hand.

No fire or lightning would come from there. It could not cause any beams of light or explosions, and no strange markings were going to appear on his wrist.

However, his right hand could still negate all kinds of supernatural powers. It did not matter if that power was good or evil or even the systems of god seen in the myths.

"Well, for the people who live in this city, the power they have is like a part of their personality, so you should probably be a bit forgiving as far as that goes. In fact, I'm one of those espers, too."

"Is that so, idiot. Hmph. You can always just bend a spoon with your hand instead of messing around inside your head."

"..."

"Hmph, hmph. What's so great about a guy who has cast aside his natural side to artificially color himself? Hmph."

"...You don't mind if I shut that mouth of yours along with that ridiculous pride, do you?"

"I-I won't give in to terrorism. Hmph," said Index like a displeased cat. "A-anyway, you say you're an esper, but what can you do?"

"Umm, well, if you put it that way..."

Kamijou was a bit unsure of what to say.

He did not often have to explain his Imagine Breaker to people. Also, since it only reacted to supernatural powers, it could not be explained without knowledge of the supernatural or esper powers.

"Y'see, it's this right hand of mine. Oh, and in my case, it isn't through drugs; I've had it from birth."

"I see."

"If I touch it with my right hand, any kind of supernatural power will be negated. That goes for A-bomb level fireballs, tactical railguns, or even the systems of God."

"Eh?"

"Why do you have a look on your face like you just saw a miracle stone that brings good fortune in a magazine?"

“But you don’t even know the name of God and yet you just said you could negate His miracles.” In surprise, Index dug into her ear with pinky and gave a scornful laugh.

“...Kh. Th-this is really annoying. I hate being made fun of by some kind of fake magical girl who claims magic exists but can’t show you it.”

That muttering of Kamijou Touma’s soul seemed to upset Index.

“I-I’m not a fake! Magic really exists!”

“Then show me something, Halloween girl! You aren’t going to believe me about my Imagine Breaker until I destroy it with my right hand anyway. C’mon, fantasy head!”

“Fine, I will!” Index threw both her hands above her head in annoyance. “Here! These clothes! They’re the highest quality of defensive barrier called the Walking Church!”

Index spread her arms to show off the teacup-like nun’s habit.

“Walking Church? What? You’re not making any sense! It’s not very nice to keep using these incomprehensible technical terms like Index and defensive barrier, y’know!? Explaining things means to tell things to someone who doesn’t understand in a form simple enough for them to understand. Do you not get that!?”

“Wha-? How dare you say that when you aren’t even making an attempt to understand!?” Index swung her arms around in anger. “Fine, seeing is believing, right? Take a knife from the kitchen and stab me in the gut!!”

“Stab you!? Is this going to end up as a news story where it says ‘it all started with a trivial argument’ or something?”

“Ah, you don’t believe me.” Index’s shoulders rose and fell as she breathed heavily. “These have the bare minimum of components required to make up a church so that they are a church in the form of clothes. The way the cloth is woven, the way the threads are sewn, the way the embroideries decorate it...It’s all calculated. A knife won’t even put a scratch on it.”

“Yeah right. What kind of idiot would just agree to stab you? He’d have to be some unprecedented kind of juvenile criminal.”

“Will you ever stop mocking me? This is an accurate copy of the Shroud of Turin, the cloth worn by the saint that was stabbed by the Lance of Longinus, so its strength is pope-class. I guess you would say it’s something like a nuclear shelter. It turns aside or absorbs any attack, be it physical or magical. I told you I got caught on your balcony after getting shot, right? Well, I would have a giant hole in me if it wasn’t for the Walking Church. Do you understand now?

(Shut up, idiot.)

Kamijou's appreciation gauge toward Index rapidly dropped and he stared at her clothes with scorn.

"...Hmm. So if that really is a supernatural power, then would it be torn to pieces if I touched it with my right hand?"

"Yes, but only if your power is real. Heh heh heh."

"Perfect!!" shouted Kamijou as he grabbed Index's shoulder.

As if he had grabbed a cloud, he felt a strange feeling like the impact was being absorbed by a soft sponge.

"Wait...huh?"

Kamijou cooled his head and thought.

What if everything Index was saying was true (as unlikely as that was) and this Walking Church really was sewn together with supernatural power?

Would negating that supernatural power send her clothes to pieces?

"Huuuuuuuuuuhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Kamijou reflexively yelled out at the sudden premonition he had that he was about to suddenly go up a few steps on the stairway to adulthood. But...

...

...

...?

"Ehhhhhhh? ...Huh?"

Nothing happened. Nothing happened at all.

(Oh, c'mon. Don't make me worry like that.)

Kamijou just could not stand it.

"See? What was all this about your Imagine Breaker? Nothing at all happened. Heh heh."

Index put her hands on her hips and puffed her small chest in pride.

But in the next instant, her clothes fell straight down like the ribbon on a present.

All the threads sewing her nun's habit together had cleanly come apart, turning it all into mere pieces of cloth.

The hat-like one-piece hood must have been an isolated item because it alone remained. Having only her head covered made it seem all the more painful.

The girl froze still with her hands on her hips and her small chest puffed out in pride.

To sum it up, she was completely nude.

Part 4

Apparently, the girl naming herself Index had a habit of biting people when she was mad.

"Oww... You bit me all over. What are you, a mosquito at a camp?"

"..."

He received no response.

Index was naked and wrapped in a blanket. She was sitting with her legs bent back to the sides while (futilely) attempting to return her clothes to their original form by sticking safety pins into the pieces of the nun's habit.

The sound effect *dohhn* seemed to dominate the room.

It was not that a new Stand user had attacked.[5]

"...Um, princess? This may be presumptuous of me, but I have a button-down shirt and pants you could wear."

"..."

She stared at him with snake-like eyes.

"...Um, princess?"

(What kind of character is this she's playing?)

"...What?" she replied when he called out to her again.

"I was completely the one at fault there."

[5] A reference to Jojo's Bizarre Adventure.

The only response he received was an alarm clock flying at him.

“Ee!” Kamijou shrieked just as a giant pillow flew at him as well.

To make matters even more ridiculous, a video game system and small radio came flying his way as well.

“How can you talk to me like normal after something like that happened!?”

“Ahh, no! It was quite the concerning event for this old man as well. But that’s youth for you!”

“You’re making fun of me...Uuuuuuuuhhhhhh!!”

“Okay...I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Don’t bite that rental video like it’s a handkerchief, you idiot!”

Kamijou Touma bowed down to the ground with both his hands straight forward like it was part of some kind of joke.

Deep down, Kamijou felt like his heart was being crushed in someone’s grip over having seen a girl naked for the first time.

However, Kamijou Touma was the type to not show it on his face.

...Or so he thought, but he would have been quite surprised at what he saw if he looked in a mirror.

“Done.”

While triumphantly blowing air from her nose, Index spread out the pure white nun’s habit that had somehow regained its original form from that hellish do-it-yourself job.

Dozens of safety pins glittered across the nun’s habit.

“.....(sweat)”

“Um, are you going to wear that?”

“.....(silence)”

“You’re going to wear that iron maiden?”

“.....(tears)”

“In Japanese, we call it a bed of needles.”

“...Uuuuuuhhhhhh!!”

“I get it!” apologized Kamijou as he head-butted the floor with all his might.

Meanwhile, Index stared at him like a bullied child and was about to bite through the power cord to the television. Was she a naughty cat?

“I’ll wear it! I’m a nun!!”

Kamijou was not quite sure what sense that made, but Index started changing by squirming around inside the blanket wrapped around her such that she looked like a caterpillar. Her head was the only thing sticking out of the blanket and it was as red as a bomb.

“Ahh, this reminds me of when we had to change for the pool at school.”

“...Why are you looking at me? At least look the other way.”

“What does it matter? Compared to what happened before, just changing isn’t all that arousing.”

“.....”

Index suddenly stopped moving, but when Kamijou did not seem to notice, she gave up and started changing inside the blanket again. She was so focused on what was going on inside the blanket that she did not notice at all when her hood fell off her head.

The awkward atmosphere of a silent elevator took over the room.

Kamijou’s mind had started to flee from reality, but then the term “supplementary lessons” floated up into his mind.

“Wah! That’s right! I have supplementary lessons!” Kamijou glanced at the clock on his cell phone. “Um...I have to get to school, so what are you going to do? If you’re going to stay here, I can give you a key.”

The option of simply kicking her out had disappeared from his mind.

Since Index’s Walking Church nun’s habit had reacted to Imagine Breaker, she clearly had some connection to the supernatural. That meant that not everything she had been telling him was a lie.

It was possible she really had fallen from the roof because she was being chased by magicians.

It was possible she really would have to continue playing a deadly game of tag.

It was possible wizards from a picture book or something crazy like that really were running amok in that city of science where established theories about espers existed.

And even if those things were not true, he did not want to just abandon Index.

"...That's okay. I'll leave."

However, Index stood straight up and made that dramatic announcement. She then slipped past Kamijou's side like a ghost. She showed no sign of noticing that her hood had fallen from her head. But if Kamijou tried to pick it up, he would likely cause it to fall to pieces.

"U-umm..."

"Hm? No, not that." Index turned around. "If I stay here, they will likely come after me. You don't want your room blown up, do you?"

That smoothly delivered response left Kamijou speechless.

As Index slowly exited the front door, Kamijou frantically ran after her. He wanted to do something, so he checked his wallet and found he had only 320 yen left. He ran after Index to give her what little he had, but his little toe struck the door frame at the speed of sound as he tried to exit the front door.

"Bh...myah! Myaahhh!!"

As Kamijou held his foot and let out that strange cry, Index turned around in shock. As Kamijou writhed around in great pain, his cell phone fell from his pocket. At the exact moment he realized that, the LCD screen struck the hard floor and he heard the crack of a fatal blow.

"Uuuuhhhh! S-such misfortune."

"I'd say that was clumsiness, not misfortune," said Index with a slight smile. "But if this Imagine Breaker is real, it may be inevitable."

"...What do you mean?"

"This is related to the world of magic, so I doubt you will believe me," said Index with a giggle. "But if the divine protection of God and the red string of fate actually exist, then wouldn't your right hand negate all of *those things*?" Index shook her safety pin-covered nun's habit and added, "The power of this Walking Church was a blessing of God after all."

“Wait. What we call fortune and misfortune are just matters of probability and statistics. What you’re talking about is completely-...!”

The second he said that, Kamijou’s finger touched the doorknob and was shocked by static electricity.

“Wha-!?” he cried out as his body twitched reflexively.

The odd way his muscles moved caused a cramp in his right calf.

“~ ~!!”

The agony left him incapacitated for about six hundred seconds.

“.....Um, sister?”

“Yes?”

“.....Please explain.”

“There’s not that much to explain,” said Index as if it was obvious. “If what you said about your right hand is true, then merely having it is enough to be continually negating the power of fortune.”

“.....Do you mean what I think you mean?”

“Just by touching the air, your right hand is giving you more and more misfortune♪”

“Gyaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!! S-such misfortuuuuuuuunnnneeeee!!”

Kamijou did not believe in the occult, but things were different when it was related to misfortune. At any rate Kamijou was the type of person to whom nothing he did ever turned out well. It was to the point that he felt like the entire universe was out to get him.

Meanwhile, a pure white nun gazed upon him with the smile of the Virgin Mary.

In her eyes was what people called an inviting look.

“Wouldn’t the real misfortune be having been born with that power?♪”

The smiling nun brought tears to Kamijou’s eyes and he finally realized the conversation had gotten off track.

“W-wait, that’s not it! Do you have somewhere to go once you leave here? I don’t know what situation you’re in, but you can just hide here if these magicians or whatever are nearby.”

“If I stay here, the enemies will come here.”

“How can you be sure? If you just stay in my room and don’t draw any attention to yourself, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“That’s not true.” Index pinched at the chest of her clothes. “This Walking Church functions using magic power. The church seems to call it ‘divine power’, but it’s the same mana. Simply put, the enemy seems to be searching for the magic power of the Walking Church.”

“Why are you wearing clothes that act as a tracking device!?”

“I told you its defensive power is pope-class, remember? You’re right hand tore it to pieces, though.”

“...”

“You tore it to pieces, though.”

“I said I was sorry, so don’t look at me with those tearful eyes. ...But Imagine Breaker destroyed that Walking Church, right? So shouldn’t the tracking device-like functionality be gone too?”

“Even if it was, they will know the Walking Church was destroyed. As I said before, its defensive power is pope-class. Simply put, it is like a fortress. If I was the enemy, I would make an appearance when that fortress was destroyed whatever the reason might be.”

“Wait a second. That’s all the more reason I can’t just let you go. I still don’t believe in the occult, but if someone is after you, I can’t just let you leave.”

Index stared blankly at him.

From just that look, she truly, truly seemed like nothing more than a normal girl.

“...Then will you follow me to the depths of hell?”

She smiled.

It was such a heartbreaking smile that Kamijou was left speechless for an instant.

Index had used kind words to implicitly say, “Do not come with me.”

“Don’t worry. I am not alone. If I can escape to the church, they will shelter me.”

“...Hmm. So where is this church?”

“In London.”

“That’s a long way away! How far are you planning to run!?”

“Hm? Oh, don’t worry. I think there are a few branches in Japan,” replied Index as her nun’s habit that looked the result of a bullied wife fluttered.

“A church, hm? There might be one in the city.”

The term “church” brought to mind a giant wedding hall, but the examples in Japan were pretty shabby. First of all, the culture had little to do with Christianity. Also, a country with so many earthquakes had few historical buildings. The churches Kamijou had seen out of train windows had all been small prefab buildings with a cross on the top. He had a feeling he was mistaken in thinking those were nouveau riche churches, though.

“Oh, but it can’t just be any church. It has to be the British style I belong to.”

“???”

“Um, there are lots of different kinds of Christianity,” said Index with a bitter smile. “First, there is the distinction between the old style Catholics and the new style Protestants. Also, while I belong to the Catholics, there are various types of them as well. For example there is the Roman Catholic Church centered on the Vatican, the Russian Orthodox Church with its headquarters in Russia, and the Anglican Church with its core at St. George’s Cathedral.”

“...What happens if you accidentally go to the wrong church?”

“They would turn me away,” said Index with the same bitter smile. “The Russian Orthodox Church and the Anglican Church primarily exist within their respective countries, so Anglican churches are rare in Japan.”

“...”

Things were not looking good.

Was it possible Index had tried going to church after church before she collapsed from hunger? What had she been feeling as she fled and fled while being turned away at each church she went to?

“Don’t worry. I just have to keep at it until I find a British-style church.”

“...”

For just an instant, Kamijou thought about the power in his right hand.

“Hey! ...If you’re ever in any trouble, you can stop by here again.”

That was all he could say.

He had the power to kill even God and yet that was all he could say.

“Sure. I’ll stop by if I’m hungry.”

Her sunflower-like smile was so perfect that Kamijou could not say anything in response.

And then a cleaning robot passed by, having to go out of its way to avoid Index.

“Hyah!?”

That perfect smile was blown away in an instant. Index jumped as if she had a cramp in her leg and then tripped backwards. With a horrible sounding thud, her head struck the wall behind her.

“~ ~ ~ ~! S-some weird thing just showed up like it was nothing!”

Index had tears in her eyes, but she completely forgot to even hold the back of her head as she shouted out.

“Don’t point at it and call it weird. It’s just a cleaning robot.”

Kamijou sighed.

Its size and shape were similar to a drum container. It had small tires on the bottom and a circular rotating mop similar to those on a street cleaner. It had cameras in order to avoid people and other obstacles, so they were quite hated by girls in miniskirts.

“...I see. I had heard Japan was a leading nation in technology, but I didn’t know you had made mechanized Agathions.”[6]

“Hello?” Kamijou was a bit frightened by how impressed Index seemed. “This is Academy City. You can find those things all over the city.”

“Academy City?”

“Yes. It’s a city made by buying up the entire western area of Tokyo where development had slowed. The name comes from the fact that it has dozens of universities and hundreds of elementary, middle, and high schools in it.” Kamijou sighed. “Eighty percent of the residents are students, so all the apartment buildings you see are dorms.”

[6] An agathion is a familiar spirit which appears only at midday in the shape of a human or an animal, or even within a talisman, bottle or magic ring.

He omitted the fact that it had a hidden face where esper powers and bodies were developed alongside the studying.

“That’s why the city is a bit odd. The city is overflowing with university experiments like the automated disposal of kitchen waste, the wind turbines that function well enough to be practical, and the cleaning robots like this one. Thanks to all that, our level of culture is about twenty years ahead of anywhere else.”

“Hmm.” Index carefully examined the cleaning robot. “So are all the buildings here part of Academy City?”

“Yup. I guess it might be best to leave the city if you’re looking for an Anglican church. All the churches here are probably teaching institutions for theology or Jungian psychology.”

“Hm.”

Index nodded and then finally brought a hand up to the back of her head where she had hit the wall.

“Hyah!? H-huh? My hood is gone!?”

“Oh, you finally noticed? It fell off earlier.”

“Hyah?”

By “earlier”, Kamijou had meant when she was changing in the blanket, but Index seemed to mistake it for when she had tripped backwards in shock over the cleaning robot. She started looking around on the floor and a question mark appeared over her head.

“Oh, I know! That electric Agathion!”

While still mistaken, she made a dash after the cleaning robot and disappeared around a corner of the passageway.

“...Ahh, what is going on?”

Kamijou look at the door to his room where Index’s hood was and then down the passageway. Index was nowhere to be seen. There had been no farewell, tearful or otherwise.

(From the looks of her, I get the feeling she’ll live on even if the world is destroyed.)

He had no proof of that, but nevertheless that was the thought he had.

Part 5

“Okay, I have a handout for you. Follow along while we go through this supplementary lesson.”

Even after spending an entire term in that class, Kamijou still could not believe it.

The homeroom teacher of Year 1 Class 7, Tsukuyomi Komoe, was a ridiculous teacher who was so short that only her head could be seen when she stood behind her desk. That little girl teacher was one of the school’s seven mysteries, she was 135 centimeters tall, there was a legend saying she was refused riding a roller coaster due to safety concerns, and she looked all the world like a twelve year old who should be carrying a soprano recorder and wearing a yellow hard hat and a red randoseru.

“I won’t stop you from talking amongst yourselves, but you need to listen to what I say. I put a lot of effort into making a quiz, so if you do poorly on it, you will be punished with the See Through lesson.”

“Sensei, isn’t that where you play poker with a blindfold on!? That’s part of the Curriculum for Clairvoyance! I’ve heard you can’t leave until you win ten times in a row despite not being able to see your cards, so wouldn’t we just be stuck here until morning!?” protested Kamijou Touma.

“Oh, but Kamijou-chan, you don’t have enough development credits, so you’ll be doing the See Through lesson regardless.”

“Ugh,” Kamijou was at a loss of words when faced with the salesman smile of a salaryman teacher.

“...Mhh. I see. Komoe-chan finds you so cute she just can’t help herself, Kami-yan,” said the blue-haired pierced-eared[7] (male) class representative who was sitting next to Kamijou.

“...Do you sense malice coming from that teacher’s back as she enjoyably stretches up to reach the blackboard?”

“What? What’s wrong with having such a cute teacher scold you for failing a quiz? Getting physically abused by a little kid like that gets you a ton of experience points, Kami-yan.”

“I knew you were a lolicon, but you’re a masochist, too!? You really are hopeless!!”

“Ah hah! It’s not that I like lolis! It’s that I *also* like lolis!!”

[7] "Blue-haired pierced-eared" is "Aogami Pierce" in Japanese. That sounds like a name, so it is used as if it is his name from here on out.

Kamijou almost shouted out “You’re omnivorous!?”, but he was interrupted.

“You two over there! If you say a single word more, you’ll be stuck with Columbus’ Egg.”

Just as one would expect, Columbus’ Egg involved standing a raw egg upside down on a desk without anything supporting it. Those specializing in Psychokinesis could keep the egg from falling when they worked to the point of the blood vessels in their brain almost bursting. (It was actually an extremely difficult challenge because the egg would break if the Psychokinesis was too powerful.) As with the previous example, you would be stuck there until morning if you could not do it.

Kamijou and Aogami Pierce stared at Tsukuyomi Komoe while forgetting to breathe.

“Okay?”

Her smile was quite frightening.

While Komoe-sensei loved being called “cute” she got incredibly angry when called “small”.

However, she did not seem to mind being looked down on by the students. Part of that was just something that could not be helped within Academy City. The city was a veritable Neverland where over eighty percent of the population was students. The opposition to salaryman teachers was harsh even compared to a normal school, and more importantly, the “strength” of a student was based on both their academic ability and their power.

The teachers were the ones that developed the students, but the teachers themselves had no powers. Some, like the PE teachers and guidance counselors, seemed like they were from some foreign unit because they had to train Level 3 monsters with their own fists, but it would be cruel to expect that of a chemistry teacher like Komoe.

“...Hey, Kami-yan.”

“What?’

“Would it turn you on to get lectured by Komoe-sensei?”

“I’m not you! Just shut up already, idiot! If we have to play with a raw egg even though we don’t have Psychokinesis, we’ll be spending our entire summer vacation here! If you get it, shut that fake Kansai dialect mouth of yours!”

“Fake... D-d-d-d-d-don’t call it fake! I’m really from Osaka!”

“Shut up. I know you’re from a rice region. I’m in a bad mood, so don’t make me play the straight man right now.”

“I-I-I’m not from a rice region! Ah. A-ahhh! I sure do love takoyaki.”

“Stop trying to force yourself into the Kansai role! Are you going to bring takoyaki for lunch just for this role?”

“What are you talking about? Not even someone from Osaka eats only takoyaki, right?”

“...”

“Right? I think that’s right...no, wait. But...but yeah....but huh? Which is it?”

“You’re falling out of character, Mr. Fake Kansai,” said Kamijou before sighing and looking out the window.

He felt like he should be by Index’s side rather than dealing with that pointless supplementary lesson.

The Walking Church nun’s habit she wore had indeed reacted to Kamijou’s right hand (although “reacted” may be an understatement), but that did not mean he believed in magic. Most likely, the majority of what Index had said was a lie, and even if she was not lying, she may have just mistaken some natural phenomenon for the occult.

Even so...

(I guess the fish that escapes always seems huge.)

Kamijou sighed again. If the alternative was being stuck in that desk in that sauna-like classroom that had no air conditioning, charging into a fantasy of swords and magic may have been better. And he even had a cute (he was somehow hesitant to say beautiful) heroine to go with it.

“...”

Kamijou recalled the hood Index had forgotten in his room.

In the end, he had not returned it. *He did not view it as having been unable to return it*. Even if Index had disappeared, he would likely have found her if he seriously started looking for her. And even if he had not, he could still be out there running around the city looking for her with the hood in one hand.

When he thought about it, he realized he had wanted some kind of connection. He had felt that she might come back to get it someday.

Because that white girl had shown him such a perfect smile...

He had felt that she would disappear like an illusion if he did not leave some kind of connection.

He had been afraid.

(...Oh, so that's it.)

After going through those slightly poetic thoughts, Kamijou finally realized something.

When it came down to it, he had not hated that girl who had gotten caught on his balcony. He had liked her enough that the thought of never seeing her again left him with a slight twinge of regret.

"...Ah, dammit."

He clicked his tongue. With how much she was weighing on his mind, he wished he had stopped her from leaving.

(Come to think of it, what was with those 103,000 grimoires she mentioned?)

Index had said that the group called a magic cabal that was after her (Was a cabal something like a corporation?) seemed to be pursuing her because they wanted those 103,000 grimoires. And apparently, Index had been fleeing with those 103,000 grimoires in her possession.

It was not a key or a map to the place where all those books were stored.

When Kamijou had asked where all those books were, she had simply said, "Right here." However, as far as Kamijou could see, she did not have a single book. At any rate, Kamijou's room was not large enough to hold one hundred thousand books.

"...What was that all about?"

Kamijou tilted his head to the side in puzzlement. Since Index's Walking Church nun's habit had reacted to Imagine Breaker, what she was saying was not purely a delusion. But...

"Sensei? Kamijou-kun is staring out the window at the fluttering skirts of the girl's tennis team."

Aogami Pierce's forced Kansai dialect sent Kamijou's focus in a U-turn back into the classroom.

"..."

Komoe-sensei fell silent.

She seemed to have undergone quite a shock by the fact that Kamijou Touma-kun had not been focused on the lesson. She had the look of a twelve year old who had just found out the truth about Santa Claus.

Just as that thought reached his mind, Kamijou Touma was pierced by the hostile gazes of his classmates who wished to protect the human rights of that "child".

♦

While it was called a supplementary lesson, they had been stuck there until the time when all students were supposed to have left school.

"...Such misfortune," muttered Kamijou as he gazed at the three propellers of a wind turbine glittering in the sunset. Any kind of nightlife was forbidden, so the last bus and train in Academy City were set to go out when the students were all supposed to have left school.

Kamijou missed the last bus, so he was trudging along through the scorching shopping district that seemed to go on forever. A security robot passed by him as he did. It was also a drum on wheels and it functioned as something like a walking security camera. They had originally been improved versions of robot dogs, but children would gather around them and block their path. For that simple reason, all the work robots had been made into drum container shapes.

"Ah, there you are, you bastard! Wait up...wait! You! I'm talking to you! Stop!!"

The summer heat had done Kamijou in, so he just stared at the slowly moving security robot and thought about how Index had run off after a cleaning robot. Finally, he realized that voice was calling out to him.

He turned around to figure out what was going on.

It was a middle school-aged girl. Her shoulder-length brown hair glowed a flame-red in the sunset and her face was dyed even redder. She wore a gray pleated skirt, a short sleeve blouse, and a summer sweater... At that point, he suddenly realized who she was.

"...Oh, it's you again, Biri Biri[8] middle schooler."

"Don't call me Biri Biri! I have a name! It's Misaka Mikoto! Why don't you learn it already!? You've been calling me Biri Biri since we first met!"

[8] Biri Biri is Japanese onomatopoeia for an electric shock.

(Since we first met...?) Kamijou thought back. (Oh, right.)

When they had first met, she had been surrounded by delinquents just like the other day. As the children approached her, he had thought they were after her wallet and stepped forward in an Urashima Tarou-esque move. However, for some reason, the girl was the one that got mad, saying, “Shut up! Don’t get in the way of other people’s fights! Biri Biri!” Kamijou had of course blocked her Biri Biri with his right hand and she had responded with, “Huh? Why didn’t that work? Then what about this? Huh?” One thing had led to another, and things had ended up in their current state.

“...Huh? What? I’m not sad, so why am I crying, mother?”

“Why do you have a distant look in your eyes?”

Kamijou was exhausted from the supplementary lesson, so he decided to not give much thought in how to deal with the Biri Biri girl.

“The girl staring at Kamijou’s face with a stunned expression is the Railgun girl from yesterday. She is so frustrated over losing a single fight that she has come back to Kamijou again and again to challenge him to a rematch.”

“...Who is that explanation for?”

“She is strong-willed and hates to lose, but is actually quite a lonely person and is in charge of taking care of the class pet.”

“Don’t tack strange additions onto the setting!!”

The girl, Misaka Mikoto, flailed her arms around and all focus on the street was drawn to her. That was not too surprising. The completely normal summer uniform she wore was the uniform of Tokiwadai Middle School, one of the five most prestigious and elite schools in Academy City. For some reason, the explosively refined girls from Tokiwadai seemed to stand apart even in a station at rush hour, so it would surprise anyone to see one sitting on the floor of a train messing around with their cell phone just like anyone else.

“So what do you want, Biri Biri? Actually, why are you wearing your uniform during summer vacation? Do you have supplementary lessons?”

“Gh...Sh-shut up.”

“Were you worried about the class bunny?”

“I told you to stop adding in that animal stuff! Also, today I’m going to make you twitch like frog legs with electrodes attached, so get your will and inheritance in order!”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not!?”

“Because I’m not in charge of my class’s pet.”

“Why you... Quit making fun of me!!”

The middle school girl stomped down on the tiles of the footpath.

At that exact moment, a tremendous noise came from the cell phones of the people walking along the area. Also, the cable broadcast in the shopping district cut out and a horrible noise came from the security robot.

The crackling sound of static electricity came from the middle school girl’s hair.

That Level 5 girl who could use a Railgun with nothing but her own body smiled such that her canines were bared like a beast.

“Hmph. How about that? Has that changed your cowardly mind? ...Mgh!”

In a frantic attempt to cover her mouth, Kamijou’s hand covered Misaka Mikoto’s entire composed face.

(Sh-shut up. Please just shut your mouth! Everyone’s cell phones were fried and they’re looking none too pleased!! If they find out it was us, they’ll make us pay, and I have no idea how much that cable broadcast costs!!)

Due to his recent encounter with that silver-haired nun girl, Kamijou prayed with all his might to the god who he normally only thought of around Christmas.

His prayers must have made their way to heaven because no one approached Kamijou and Mikoto.

(Thank goodness.)

Kamijou gave a sigh of relief (as he continued to suffocate Mikoto).

“Message, message. Error No. 100231-YF. Offensive electromagnetic waves in violation of radio laws detected. System malfunction detected. As this is possible cyber terrorism, avoid using electronics.”

Imagine Breaker and Railgun hesitantly turned around.

A drum container was on its side on the footpath spewing smoke as it spoke to itself nonsensically.

In the next instant, the security robot began sounding a high-pitched alarm.

Naturally, they ran away.

They entered a back alley, kicked over a dirty plastic bucket, and scared off a black cat as they continued running.

(Come to think of it, I didn't do anything wrong. Why am I running away with her?)

Even with that thought, he kept running. After all, he had heard on a talk show that those security robots cost 1.2 million yen each.

"Uuhh...S-such misfortune. Why do I always get caught up in things having to do with *her*?"

"What do you mean by that!? And my name is Misaka Mikoto!"

The two had finally come to a stop in a back, back, back alley. One of the lined-up buildings must have been demolished because a rectangular area opened up there. It looked like a good place for street basketball.

"Shut up, Biri Biri! You're the one that destroyed all of my electronics with that lightning yesterday! What could you possibly need after that!?"

"It's your fault for pissing me off!"

"I don't even understand what has you so mad! I've never even laid a finger on you!"

Afterwards, Mikoto had attacked Kamijou with everything she had, but Kamijou had stopped it all with his right hand. Her attacks did not end at that Railgun. She could twist together collected iron sand to create a whip-like sword of steel, send powerful electromagnetic waves to mess with internal organs, and she could finish it all off by sending real lightning down from the sky.

But none of it was a match for Kamijou Touma.

As long as it was a supernatural power, Kamijou Touma could negate it.

"You just kept coming in at me and wore yourself out! Don't use your powers too much and then blame me when you don't have enough stamina to keep it up, Biri Biri!"

"~~!!" Mikoto ground her back teeth together. "Th-that didn't count. It can't count! You never attacked me! That makes it a draw!!"

"Sigh...Fine, fine. It was your win. Punching you isn't going to fix my air conditioner."

"Gah...! W-wait a second! Take this seriously!!" shouted Mikoto as she flailed her arms around.

Kamijou sighed.

"*Are you sure you want me taking this seriously*?"

"Ah..." Mikoto trailed off.

Kamijou lightly clenched his right fist and then opened it again. A cold sweat started pouring from Misaka Mikoto's entire body at that simple action. She froze in place, unable to even take a step backwards.

Mikoto did not know what Kamijou's power really was, so Kamijou was truly an unknown horror to her for having sealed all of her trump cards without breaking a sweat.

It was not all that surprising. Kamijou Touma had received Misaka Mikoto's attacks for over two hours straight without receiving a single scratch. It was only natural for her to wonder what would happen if he got serious.

Kamijou sighed and averted his gaze.

As if the strings holding her in place had snapped, Mikoto finally staggered a few steps back.

"...What can I call this other than misfortune?" Kamijou was shocked at how frightened she was. "First my room's electronics were done in, then I meet that self-proclaimed magician in the morning, and now I meet this Biri Biri esper in the evening."

"Magician? What?"

"..." Kamijou thought for a bit. "Yeah... That's what I want to know."

Normally, Mikoto would have likely shouted, "Are you making fun of me!? Is your head as messed up as your power!?" and then Biri Biri'd. However, she only jumped in fright whenever he looked at her that day.

It had only been a bluff to fool her, but he felt bad about how effective it had been.

(What was all that magician nonsense, anyway?)

Kamijou was reminded of what had happened that morning. That white nun had used that word readily enough, but now that he thought back, the term was definitely removed from reality.

(I wonder why it didn't seem so strange while Index was around.)

Had there been some mysterious something there that made it seem more believable?

"...Wait, what am I thinking?" muttered Kamijou while completely ignoring the Biri Biri girl named Misaka Mikoto who was trembling in fear like a puppy.

He had cut his ties with Index and whatever world she lived in. The world was a large place, so it was unlikely he would run into her again in a meaningless coincidence. Thinking about magicians was entirely pointless.

Despite that, he could not get it out of his head.

He still had that pure white hood she had forgotten in his room.

That one remaining connection continued to irritatingly prick at the edges of his mind.

Not even Kamijou Touma knew why he was thinking about it so much.

After all, he had the power to kill even God.

Part 6

Those days, one could not buy even a large gyudon with only 320 yen.

".....Regular, hm?"

The girls who happily ate a bento the size of a light novel would likely not understand, but a sweating growing boy saw the regular size as nothing more than a snack.

After driving off the Biri Biri girl, Kamijou had headed to a gyudon restaurant to eat his "snack". With only thirty yen remaining (tax included), he approached his dorm building with the sun having already set.

The place seemed deserted.

It was the first day of summer vacation, so everyone was probably out having fun.

The building looked like a stereotypical one-room apartment building. Pathways along one wall of the rectangular building had doors lined up on them. The metal railing had no plastic sheets to prevent peering up girls' skirts because it was a guy's dorm.

The front doors and balconies on the opposite side were built on the sides of the building going back as seen from the road. In other words, they were in the gaps between buildings.

The entrance to the building was self-locking, but the distance between buildings was only two meters. One could easily sneak into it by jumping from roof to roof as Index had done that morning.

Kamijou went through the self-locking entrance, passed by the *storage room known as the dorm manager's room* and got on the elevator. It was just for fun that the elevator was more cramped and dirty than the elevator for bringing items into a factory, but the "R" button, indicating the roof, was sealed with a small metal plate in order to prevent Romeo and Juliets from heading up to the roof night after night.

With a microwave oven-like ding, the elevator stopped on the seventh floor.

Kamijou pushed aside the door that clanked as it opened and exited to the passageway. He was on the seventh floor, but there was no wind and it seemed even hotter and stuffier than before due to the neighboring building being so close.

"Hm?"

Kamijou finally realized something. Down the straight passageway and right in front of his door, three cleaning robots were gathered. Seeing three of them was rare. For one thing, he was pretty sure only five were ever deployed to that dorm.

From the way they were trembling and moving back and forth, they seemed to be cleaning up quite a horrible mess.

For some reason, Kamijou had an intense feeling of impending misfortune.

Those drum robots had enough power to cleanly rip up gum that was stuck to the floor, so what was giving three of them such trouble? Kamijou shuddered at the thought that his neighbor Tsuchimikado Motoharu might have gotten drunk while acting like a delinquent in order to lose his virginity and had ended up vomiting in tremendous quantity while using Kamijou's door in place of a telephone pole.

"What happened...?"

People had an unfortunate tendency to want to see horrible things.

After taking a few more subconscious steps forward, he finally saw it.

The mysterious girl named Index had collapsed from hunger.

".....Ahh."

He could not see all of her due to the robots being in the way, but someone wearing a white nun's habit covered in glittering safety pins was clearly collapsed face down there.

Even though the three drums were doing nothing but ramming her, Index was not moving at all. It made her seem all the more pitiful, just like if she was being pecked at by city crows. For one, the cleaning robots were made to avoid people and other obstacles, so why was she being treated as not human even by those machines?

"...I guess this is misfortune, too."

Kamijou Touma would have been surprised to see his face in the mirror at that moment. He had a clear smile on his face.

He had been worried deep down. He may not have believed her about the magicians, but it was possible some cult was chasing the girl around.

He was glad to see her in her usual(?) state.

And even ignoring those worries, he was simply happy to see her again.

Kamijou then remembered the one thing she had forgotten: the pure white hood he had not given back to her. He found it strange that he saw that hood like some kind of charm.

"Hey! What are you doing here?"

He called out to her and ran over.

(Why does just running over put me in the mood of an elementary school kid who can't sleep on the night before a trip? Why does each step I take forward make me feel like I'm headed to the store on the release date of a major RPG?)

Index had not yet noticed him.

Kamijou Touma forced down a smile at how "Index-like" that was.

And then he finally noticed Index was lying in a pool of blood.

"...Ah...?"

The first thing he felt was confusion, not shock.

He had been unable to see it before because the group of cleaning robots had been in the way. As she lay face down, he could see a single horizontal strike near the bottom of her back. The wound was from a blade, but it was so straight it looked like someone had used a ruler and a box cutter. The end of her waist-length silver hair had been cleanly cut off and that silver hair was dyed red by the red substance flowing from the wound.

For an instant, Kamijou was unable to comprehend that it was human blood.

The difference in reality between the instant before and the instant after sent his thoughts into chaos. Red...red...ketchup? Had Index been using her last strength to suck up ketchup just before she collapsed from hunger? With that pleasant image in his mind, Kamijou almost smiled.

He almost smiled, but he did not.

There was no way he could.

The three cleaning robots continued to move back and forth while making a clanking noise. They were cleaning the stain on the floor. They were cleaning the red substance spreading across the floor. They were cleaning the red substance flowing from Index's body. Like digging at a wound with a dirty rag, they were sucking out everything inside Index's body.

"St...op. Stop! Shit!!"

Kamijou's eyes finally came into focus with reality. He frantically grabbed at the cleaning robots gathered around the seriously injured Index. The robots were made unnecessarily heavy to prevent theft and they had a good bit of horsepower, so he could not tear them away from her.

Of course, the cleaning robots were only cleaning the continually spreading stain on the floor, so they never actually touched Index's wound. Even so, Kamijou saw them as bugs swarming over a festering wound.

And yet he was having trouble moving aside even one of those heavy and powerful robots, much less three. While his focus was on one of them, the other two would head for the stain.

He was supposed to have the power to kill even god.

And yet he was unable to move those toys out of the way.

Index said nothing.

Her pale purple lips were so still he was not even sure if she was breathing.

"Shit, shit!!" Kamijou shouted out in confusion. "What happened? What the hell happened!? God dammit! Who the hell did this to you!?"

"Hm? That would be us magicians."

And that was exactly why the voice coming from behind him was not Index's.

His age was...probably fourteen or fifteen just like Index. His great height was characteristic of foreigners. His clothes were...a pure black version of the habits worn by priests in the church. However, it was unlikely you would find anyone who would call that man a priest even if you searched all across the world.

It may have been because he was standing upwind, but Kamijou would smell the horribly sweet perfume on him even though he was over fifteen meters away. His shoulder-length blond hair had been dyed red like the sunset, silver rings glittered on all ten of his fingers like brass knuckle, he had poisonous earrings on his ears, a cell phone strap could be seen sticking out of his pocket, a lit cigarette moved at the edge of his mouth, and as if to finish it all off, he had a barcode like tattoo underneath his right eye.

You could not quite call him a priest and you could not quite call him a delinquent.

The air around where the man stood in the passageway was clearly odd.

It was like the area was being ruled by completely different rules from the ones that Kamijou had used up until that point. That strange feeling spread out throughout the area like icy tentacles.

What Kamijou felt first was neither fear nor anger.

It was confusion and unease. It was a desperate loneliness like his wallet had been stolen in a foreign country where he did not know the language. The icy tentacle-like feeling spread through his body and froze his heart, but then Kamijou realized something.

This is a magician.

This has become a different world where strange things like magicians exist.

He could tell at first glance.

He still did not believe in magicians...

But he could tell this was definitely a resident of somewhere beyond the world he lived in.

“Hm? Hm, hm, hm. She got her pretty good.” The magician looked around and the cigarette in the corner of his mouth waggled as he spoke. “I heard Kanzaki sliced her, but this is... I thought there wasn’t anything to worry about because there was no blood trail...”

The magician looked at the cleaning robots gathered behind Kamijou Touma.

Most likely, Index had been “sliced” elsewhere and had barely escaped here with her life before collapsing. She must have left fresh blood as she went, but the cleaning robots had cleaned it all away.

“But...why?”

“Hm? You mean why she came back here? Who knows? Maybe she forgot something. Come to think of it, she had her hood when I shot her yesterday. Did she lose it somewhere?”

The magician standing in front of Kamijou had said “came back”.

In other words, he had been following Index’s actions all day. And he knew that she had lost the hood to her Walking Church nun’s habits.

Index had said something about the magicians searching for the magic power of her Walking Church.

That meant the magicians had been following Index by detecting the supernatural power in her Walking Church. They would have known the Walking Church was destroyed when the “signal” cut out...Index had mentioned that too.

But then Index had to have known.

She had known, but she still seemed to have relied on the defensive powers of the Walking Church.

But then why had she returned? Why did she need to recover a portion of the destroyed and therefore useless Walking Church? Kamijou’s right hand had rendered the entire Walking Church useless, so there was no point in recovering the hood to it.

“—Then will you follow me to the depths of hell?”

Suddenly, it all clicked.

Kamijou remembered something. He had never touched the hood of the Walking Church that had been left in his room. In other words, the hood still had magic power. She must have thought the magicians might detect it and head there.

And so Index had braved the danger to “come back”.

“...You idiot.”

There had been no need to do that. It had been Kamijou’s clumsiness that had destroyed her Walking Church, and he had realized she had left her hood in his room yet had left it there. And more importantly, Index did not have any obligation, duty, or right to protect Kamijou.

Even so, she had not been able to help but head back.

Kamijou Touma was a complete stranger she had met less than half an hour before.

And yet she had not been able to help but risk her life and head back to keep him from getting involved in that fight with magicians.

"You idiot!!"

Index's unmoving back got on his nerves for some strange reason.

Index had told Kamijou before that his misfortune was due to his right hand.

Apparently, his right hand was subconsciously negating even the faint supernatural powers that were things like the divine protection of god and the red string of fate.

And if Kamijou had not carelessly touched her and destroyed her Walking Church nun's habit, she would have at least not returned.

(No. Those kinds of excuses don't matter.)

His right hand and the destruction of her Walking Church were not the reason she had felt the need to return.

If Kamijou had only not wished for that connection...

If he had only returned her fallen hood to her in that instant...

"Hm? Hm, hm, hm? C'mon, I can't have you looking at me like that." The cigarette in the corner of the magician's mouth waggled as he spoke. "It wasn't me that sliced her and I doubt Kanzaki meant to turn this into something bloody. The Walking Church is supposed to be an absolute defense, after all. Really, she shouldn't have been injured at all by that. ...Honestly, what twist of fate led that being destroyed? Unless St. George's Dragon has come again, I don't see how a pope-class barrier could have been destroyed."

That last bit had been spoken to himself and his smile disappeared as he said it.

However, that was also only for an instant. The cigarette in the corner of his mouth twitched back up as if he had suddenly remembered to smile.

"Why?" Kamijou said despite not expecting an answer. "Why? I don't believe in the magic from fairy tales and I don't really understand magicians or whatever you are. But aren't there good and evil types of you? Aren't there magicians that protect things and people?"

He knew very well that he had no right to use fox words there.

When Index had left, Kamijou Touma had let her go and gotten back to his normal life.

And yet he could not help but say it.

“You ganged up on this little girl, chased her all over the place, and then injured her this badly. Can you really say you’re just with this reality staring you in the face!?”

“Like I said, it was Kanzaki that did this, not me.” The magician paused for a second. Kamijou’s words had not hit home with him in the slightest. “And whether she’s injured or not, we have to retrieve her.”

“Retrieve her?”

Kamijou did not understand what the magician meant.

“Hm? Oh, I see. You knew the word magician, so I assumed you had been fully filled-in. I guess she was afraid of getting you involved.” The magician exhaled cigarette smoke. “Yeah, we need to retrieve her. Technically, it isn’t her we need to retrieve though; it’s the 103,000 grimoires she has.”

...There was those 103,000 grimoires again.

“I see, I see. This country isn’t very religious, so I guess you don’t understand,” said the magician in a bored sounding voice despite the fact that he was smiling. “The Index Librorum Prohibitorum is a list created by the Church of all the evil books that will sully your soul just by reading them. Even if you announce that these dangerous books are out there, people can still unknowingly acquire one if they don’t know their titles. Thus, she has become something of a crucible of poisonous books with 103,000 such books. Oh, but be careful. Reading just one of the books she has would make a vegetable out of someone from an irreligious nation like this.”

Despite what he said, Index did not have a single book. The lines of her body were clearly visible in that nun’s habit, so it would be obvious if she was hiding any under her clothes. Not to mention that no person could walk around carrying one hundred thousand books. That was an entire library’s worth of books.

“D-don’t be ridiculous! And where exactly are these books!?”

“Oh, they’re there. They’re in her memory,” said the magician as if it was obvious. “Do you know what a perfect memory is? It seems to be the ability to memorize anything you see in an instant and never forget even a single sentence or letter. Simply put, it makes you a human scanner.” The magician smiled disinterestedly. “It has nothing to do with our occult or your science fiction. It’s a natural condition. She has been to the British Museum, the Louvre, the Vatican Library, the Pataliputra ruins, Château de Compiègne, Mont Saint-Michel Abbey, and everywhere else that has grimoires that cannot be taken from where they are sealed. She *stole them with her eyes* and stores them as a grimoire library.”

Kamijou simply could not believe it.

He could not believe that these grimoires existed or that she had a perfect memory.

But what mattered was not if that was correct. What mattered was that someone *believed* it was true and had sliced open a girls' back.

"Well, she has no ability to refine magic power herself, so she's harmless." The cigarette in the corner of the magician's mouth moved up happily. "But since that stopper was prepared, the Church must have some concerns. Well, that has nothing to do with a magician like me. At any rate, those 103,000 grimoires are quite dangerous, so I came to shelter her before *anyone who would use them* comes to take her away."

"Shelter...her?"

Kamijou Touma was utterly astonished. What had that man just said in the face of such a blood-red scene?

"Yeah, that's right. Shelter her. No matter how sensible and good hearted she may be, she cannot stand up to torture and drugs. The mere thought of handing a girl over to the likes of them hurts my heart, y'know?"

"..."

Kamijou's body was trembling in places.

It was not pure anger. Goosebumps covered his arm. The man before him viewed himself alone as right. He lived not seeing his own mistakes. All of that put together sent a chill across Kamijou's entire body like he had just plunged into a bathtub filled to the brim with tens of thousands of slugs.

The term "mad cult" oozed into his brain.

The thought of magicians that hunted people based on groundless beliefs made him feel like the nerves of his brain were going to burst.

"Who the hell do you think you are!?"

His right hand felt wrapped in heat as if in response to his anger.

His two feet that had been planted to the ground moved before he even thought about moving them. His thick body filled with flesh and blood charged toward the magician like a bullet. He clenched his right fist so hard, he felt like he was smashing his fingers to pieces.

His right hand was of no use. It would not let him defeat even a single delinquent, it would not raise his scores on tests, and it would not make him popular with girls.

But his right hand could also be quite useful. After all, he could use it to punch out the bastard standing before him.

“I would prefer to name myself as Stiyl Magnus, but I guess I’ll have to go with Fortis931.”

However, the magician was completely motionless expect for the wagging of the cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

After muttering something under his breath, he spoke to Kamijou as if introducing the pet black cat he was proud of.

“That’s my magic name. Not familiar with those? It seems we magicians cannot give our true name when we use magic. It’s an old tradition, so I don’t really understand why myself.”

They were fifteen meters apart.

Kamijou Touma filled half of that gap in just three steps.

“Fortis...I guess in Japanese, that would be ‘the strong’. Well, the etymology doesn’t really matter. What’s important is that I have given that name. For us magicians, it is less a magic name for when we use magic and more like...

Kamijou Touma took two more steps down the passageway.

Even so, the magician’s smile did not crumble. He seemed to be saying Kamijou was not even an opponent worth getting rid of his smile over.

“...a killing name, I guess.”

The magician named Stiyl Magnus grabbed the cigarette from his mouth and flicked it away to the side.

The lit cigarette flew horizontally, over the metal railing, and hit the wall of the neighboring building.

An orange line traced the cigarette’s path as an afterimage and sparks flew when it hit the wall.

“Kenaz (Flames).”[9]

The instant Stiyl muttered that, the orange line exploded.

A sword of flames appeared in a straight line as if someone had turned on a fire hose loaded with gasoline.

[9] Due to peculiarities of the Japanese language, many of Stiyl's spells contain words which have different pronunciations to what would normally been spoken. In the following passage, what Stiyl says is Kenaz, and what would normally have been said is in parentheses.

The paint gradually changed color like a picture being scorched by a lighter.

He was not touching the flames, but it still felt like his eyes were being burned just by looking at it, so Kamijou instinctually stopped running and brought his hands up to cover his face.

Kamijou stopped so suddenly that it looked like his feet had been staked to the ground.

A sudden question entered his mind.

Imagine Breaker could negate any kind of supernatural power in one blow. Not even the Level 5 Biri Biri girl's Railgun that could destroy a nuclear shelter in one blow was an exception to that.

But the truth was...

Kamijou had yet to see any supernatural power that was not esper in nature.

In other words, he had never tested it.

He had never tested it on magic.

Would his right hand really work on the strange power known as magic?

"Purisaz Naupiz Gebo (A gift of pain for the giant.)"

Past the hands covering his face, Kamijou could see the magician smiling.

While smiling, Stiyl Magnus swung the blazing flame sword horizontally at Kamijou Touma.

The instant it touched him, it lost shape and exploded in all directions like an erupting volcano.

Heat waves, flashes of light, explosive noise, and black smoke burst in every direction.

"Maybe I overdid it."

Stiyl scratched at his head in front of what looked like the aftermath of a bombing. Just to be sure, he looked around to see if anyone was coming out to see what was going on. It was the first day of summer vacation, so most of the residents of that boy's dorm would be out. However, it would be bad if some friendless shut in was in one of the rooms.

He could not see directly ahead due to a screen of flames and smoke.

However, he did not need to check. That strike had created hellish flames of three thousand degrees Celsius. At temperatures higher than two thousand degrees Celsius, the human body would melt before it burned, so the boy likely looked something like the metal railing that had melted like a sugar sculpture. He was likely splattered across the dorm wall like a used piece of gum.

Stiyl gave a sigh as he reflected on how right he had been to get the boy away from Index. Things would have been a bit more difficult if the boy had used Index's injured form as a shield.

But he could not retrieve Index as things were.

Stiyl sighed again. The wall of flames blocked him from heading to the other end of the passageway where Index was. If there was another emergency staircase on the other side of the passageway, he could manage, but it would hardly be funny if Index got caught up in the flames while he took that detour.

Stiyl shook his head in annoyance and spoke as he peered into the smoke one last time as if he could see through it.

"Thank you, excellent work, and too bad. Well, at that level, you couldn't win even if you had a thousand tries."

"Are you really so sure I can't win no matter how many times I try?"

For an instant, the magician froze in place at that voice coming from those hellish flames.

With a roar, the wall of flames and smoke swirled and was blown away.

It was as if a tornado had appeared in the center of the flames and smoke and blew them all away.

Kamijou Touma stood there.

The metal railing had been melted like a sugar sculpture, the paint on the floor and walls had peeled, and the fluorescent lights had melted and dripped down in the intense heat, but that boy had remained unharmed in the middle of those hellish flames and scorching heat.

"Honestly, what was I so afraid of?" said Kamijou with the sides of his mouth twisted in disinterest. "*This is the same right hand that destroyed Index's Walking Church*."

Kamijou truly did not understand anything about what was known as magic.

He did not know how it worked or what was going on where he could not see. Most likely, he would only understand half of it if it was explained to him from start to finish.

But there was one thing even an idiot like him knew.

In the end, it was just a supernatural power.

The crimson flames he had blown away had not been completely extinguished.

In a perfect circle around Kamijou, the scorching flames continued to burn. But...

“Out of the way.”

With that one statement, Kamijou touched the three thousand degree magical flames with his right hand and the rest of the flames vanished.

It was like the candles in a birthday cake had all been blown out at once.

Kamijou Touma looked at the magician standing before him.

The magician was as flustered as any normal human being at the unexpected turn of events.

In fact, he *was* a normal human being.

If you punched him, he would feel pain, and if you cut him with a cheap knife, he would bleed red blood.

He was a mere human being.

Kamijou’s legs were no longer cramped with fear and his body was no longer frozen with nerves.

His arms and legs moved like normal.

He moved!

“...Wha-?”

Meanwhile, Stiyl very nearly took a step backwards in shock over the incomprehensible phenomenon before him.

From what had become of the surroundings, that attack could not have been a dud. But did that mean that boy was powerful enough to withstand three thousand degrees? No, then he would no longer be human.

Kamijou Touma paid no heed to Stiyl’s confusion.

He clenched his heated right fist as hard as a rock and took a step toward Stiyl who was swaying on his feet.

“Tch!!”

Stiyl swung his right hand horizontally. The flame sword that appeared followed suit and flew forcefully toward Kamijou.

It exploded. Flames and smoke flew about.

But after the flames and smoke were blown away, Kamijou Touma stood there just as before.

“...Could he be using magic?” Stiyl muttered under his breath, but he immediately rejected the idea.

There could not be any magicians in that country that knew more about Christmas than magic and only knew Christmas as a day of dating and sex.

Also...Also, if Index who had no magic power had joined forces with a magician, she would not have needed to run away. That was how dangerous Index's memories were.

Those 103,000 grimoires were on a completely different level from merely having a nuclear missile.

All living creatures would eventually die, an apple dropped from above would fall down, and 1+1=2. You would be able to take those kinds of natural and unchangeable rules of the world, destroy them, rewrite them, and create new ones. You could make 1+1=3, make an apple dropped from below fall up, and make all dead creatures eventually be revived.

Magicians called such a being a Magic God.

Not the god of the demon world[10], but a magician who had thoroughly mastered magic to the point of entering the domain of god.

A Magic God.

But Stiyl could not feel any magic power in the boy in front of him.

He would be able to tell at a glance if he was a magician. The boy did not have the “scent” of someone from the same world as him.

But then why?

“!!”

[10] Magic God is Majin(魔神) which could also mean demon god.

To hide the shuddering spreading across his body, Stiyl created another flame sword and attacked Kamijou.

This time, it did not even explode.

Kamijou swatted at the flame sword with his right hand as if at a fly and the flame sword shattered like glass and disappeared into thin air.

He shattered that three thousand degree flame sword with a right hand that had no magical reinforcements of any kind.

"...Ah."

Abruptly, truly abruptly, something floated up in the back of Stiyl Magnus's mind.

Index's Walking Church nun's habit was pope-class and its barrier rivaled a London cathedral in its power. It was absolutely impossible to destroy it unless the legendary dragon of St. George appeared.

But Index's Walking Church had clearly been utterly destroyed since Kanzaki had sliced her.

Who had done it? And how?

"....."

By that point, Kamijou Touma had walked right up to Stiyl.

With one more step, he would be close enough to punch the magician.

"MTWOTFFTO. (Manifest one of the five great elements from which the world is constructed.) IIGOIIOF. (It is the great outset, it is the original flame.)"

An unpleasant sweat started flowing from Stiyl's entire body. This was because the creature in a summer uniform before him had taken the form of a human. Stiyl's spine trembled as he got the feeling that inside that boy's skin was not flesh and blood but some strange oozing something.

"IIBOLAIIAOE. (It is born of life, and it is the arbiter of evil.) IIMHAIIBOD. (It is mild happiness, and it is the bane of death.) IINFIIMS. (It is named fire, and it is my sword.) ICRMMBGP! (I call thee into reality, masticate my body for great power!)"

The chest of Stiyl's priest's habit swelled out and the power from within popped off the buttons.

With the roar of flames sucking in oxygen, a giant mass of flames shot out from within his clothes.

It was not merely a mass of flames.

The crimson burning flames had something black and dripping like fuel oil at its core. It was in the form of a human. The thing was reminiscent of the seabirds dripping with black fuel oil after a tanker accident and it was eternally burning.

Its name was Innocentius. Its meaning was “I will surely kill you.”

That giant flame god who bore the meaning of certain death spread its arms and charged toward Kamijou Touma like a bullet.

“Out of the way.”

Kamijou used a backhanded blow with the annoyed attitude of someone brushing aside a spider web.

Kamijou Touma blew away Stiyl Magnus’s final trump card. As if he had stabbed a water balloon with a pin, the human-shaped fuel oil symbolizing the giant flame god burst into spray and scattered about the area.

“...?”

Kamijou Touma had no real reason for not taking his last step at that moment.

It was simply that Stiyl was still smiling despite having his final trump card destroyed. That expression was enough to make him hesitate before carelessly taking that last step.

The sound of a viscous liquid moving could be heard from all around.

“Wha-...!?”

As Kamijou took a step back in surprise, the black spray returned from all directions, gathered in midair, and reformed into a human shape.

If Kamijou had taken that last step, he would certainly have been enveloped by flames from all directions.

Kamijou’s mind was thrown into disarray at the scene before his eyes. If his right hand could do what he was always saying it could, it could negate even the systems of god seen in myths in a single strike. If that had been the supernatural power known as magic, he should have been able to negate it with that one touch. And yet...

The fuel oil within the flames writhed, changed form, and now seemed to be holding a sword in both hands.

No, it was not a sword. It was a giant cross over two meters long, the type used to crucify people.

It lifted the cross up with both hands and swung it down towards Kamijou's head like a pickaxe.

"...!!"

Kamijou immediately held up his right hand to receive the blow. Not counting his right hand, Kamijou was a simple high school student. He did not have the battle skill needed to see through the attack and evade it.

The cross and his right hand clashed.

This time, it did not even disappear. As if he was grasping a mass of rubber, Kamijou felt he was going to be the one to lose that struggle. His opponent was using both hands while he could only use his right hand. The flaming cross approached Kamijou's face millimeter by millimeter.

Despite his confusion, Kamijou just barely managed to realize one thing. That mass of flames known as Innocentius was definitely reacting to his Imagine Breaker. However, it was being revived just after being annihilated. Most likely, the lag between annihilation and revival was less than a tenth of a second.

His right hand had been sealed.

If he let go for even an instant, he would likely be turned to ash by Innocentius in that instant.

"Runes."

Kamijou Touma heard something.

Due to the danger in front of him, he could not turn around, but he certainly heard someone's voice.

"Those twenty four characters used to indicate mysteries and secrets have been used as a magic language by Germanic tribes since the second century and are found in the roots of Old English."

However, Kamijou could not believe it was Index's voice despite knowing it was.

"Wha-...?"

With how beat up and bloody she was, how could she be speaking so calmly?

"Attacking Innocentius will have no effect. Unless the rune engravings carved into the walls, floor, and ceiling are eliminated, it will revive as many times as necessary."

Kamijou Touma grabbed his right wrist with his left hand and just barely managed to keep the cross from advancing any further.

Kamijou *timidly* turned around.

The girl was indeed collapsed there. But Kamijou was unable to give the name Index to "that". Like a machine, her eyes were utterly lacking in emotion.

With each word she spoke, more blood flowed from the wound on her back.

She paid no heed to that and seemed to truly be nothing more than a system meant to explain magic.

"You're...Index, right?"

"Yes. I am the grimoire library belonging to Necessarius, the 0th Parish of the Anglican Church. My proper name is Index Librorum Prohibitorum, but that can be abbreviated to Index."

The way that grimoire library named Index was acting, Kamijou almost forgot about the giant flame god trying to kill him. He felt such a chill coming from her.

"With my introduction complete, I will return to my explanation of runic magic. Simply put, it is like a reflection of the moon in a lake at night. No matter how many times you strike the lake surface with a sword, it has no meaning. If you want to strike the moon in the lake surface, you must first turn your sword on the real moon floating in the night sky."

After hearing that explanation, Kamijou finally remembered the enemy in front of him.

Did she mean that what stood before him was not the *true form* of the supernatural power? Was it something like a photograph and its negative, and it would it continue to revive unless he destroyed a different supernatural power that was creating the giant flame god?

Even then, Kamijou did not completely believe what Index was saying.

No matter what was going on around him, the common knowledge that magic did not exist refused to leave him.

But with Innocentius sealing his right hand and keeping him from moving, he could test anything regardless. And it would be difficult to ask Index to help him given her bloody state.

"Ash to ash..."

Kamijou looked up in shock. From beyond the giant flame god, a flame sword had appeared in Stiyl's right hand.

"...Dust to dust..."

And another one. A bluish-white burning flame sword extended silently from his left hand.

"...Squeamish Bloody Rood!"

With those power-filled words, he swung the two flame swords horizontally so they would slice straight through the giant flame god from left and right like a giant pair of scissors. With his right hand sealed by Innocentius, Kamijou could not block anything else.

(Shit... I need to run!!)

Before Kamijou Touma could even shout out, the two flame swords struck the giant flame god and it all turned into one giant bomb that exploded.

Part 7

When the smoke and flames cleared, the entire area looked like hell.

The metal railings had warped like sugar sculptures and even the floor tiles had melted into something like glue. The paint on the walls had peeled so the concrete was visible.

The boy was nowhere to be seen.

However, Stiyl heard the footsteps of someone running along the passageway downstairs.

"...Innocentius," he whispered and the flames spread out across the area returned to human form, went over the railing, and followed the footsteps.

Inside, Stiyl was astonished. Nothing all that amazing had happened. Just before the explosion, in the instant Stiyl had sliced through the giant flame god with the two flame swords, Kamijou had let go with his right hand and jumped over the railing.

As he fell, Kamijou had grabbed the railing one floor below and pulled himself up onto the passageway. He had no lifeline and had pulled it off with pure guts and courage, so it had actually been quite reckless.

"But..."

Stiyl gave a gentle smile. Kamijou now knew the weakness of the runes thanks to the knowledge of Index's 103,000 grimoires. As she had said, the rune magic Stiyl used was activated by carved engravings. That also meant that getting rid of the engravings would negate even the most powerful magic.

"So what?" Stiyl's expression showed no sign of concern. "You can't do it. It is utterly impossible for you to completely get rid of the runes carved into this building."

♦

"I! I really thought! I really thought I was going to die back there!!"

After jumping over the railing on the seventh floor with no lifeline, Kamijou's heart was still pounding in his chest.

As he ran along the straight passageway, he looked around. He did not fully believe what Index had said. He had merely been trying to get away from Innocentius so he could get some time to prepare himself.

"Dammit! What the hell is this!?"

But Kamijou could not help but shout out when he saw what lay before him.

He did not need to wonder where the runes were carved into the large dorm building. In fact, he had already found them. They were on the floor, on the doors, and on the fire extinguisher. Scraps of paper about the size of telephone cards were stuck all over the building like Hoichi the Earless.

Based on Index's advice (he did not like having to recall that doll-like face), he guessed that the magic was something like a jamming signal called a barrier and the runes were like the antennae sending the signal. But could he even tear off every single one of the tens of thousands of "antennae"?

With the roar of oxygen being absorbed, a human-shaped flame dropped down on the opposite side of the metal railing.

"Shit!!"

If he was caught again, he would be unable to tear them off. Kamijou immediately made a dash for the emergency staircase to his side. As he jumped further and further down, he could see scraps of paper taped to the corners of the staircase and ceiling with strange symbols that must have been runes written on them.

They had clearly been mass produced with a copy machine.

Kamijou almost shouted out “How’s a crappy copy like that supposed to work!?” but then he recalled that the appendix of shoujo manga could be used for tarot divination and even the bible was mass produced at a print shop.

(Y’know...the occult just isn’t fair.)

He felt like crying. Tens of thousands of those “rune engravings” were probably taped up all over the building. Could he find every single one of them? And for all he knew, Stiyl was taping up new pieces of copy paper at that very moment.

As if to cut off his train of thought, Innocentius dropped down from farther up the staircase.

“Shit!”

Kamijou gave up on heading further down the staircase and ran out into the passageway to the side. When the giant flame god struck the floor, flames scattered about the area and it charged into the passageway even as it bounced up from hitting the ground.

The passageway was straight, and Kamijou had no way to lose Innocentius when it came to pure speed.

“...!”

Kamijou looked over to the entrance of the emergency staircase. According to the display, he was on the second floor.

With a roar, Innocentius charged straight forward in order to arrest Kamijou’s right hand.

“O-owah!!”

Instead of using his right hand or running away along the passageway, Kamijou jumped over the second floor railing.

It was only after he jumped that he realized that the ground below was asphalt and that a number of bicycles were stopped there.

“Waaaaaaaahhhhhhh!!”

He just barely managed to land between two bicycles, but he still landed on hard asphalt. He tried to bend his knees to absorb the shock of impact, but he heard an unpleasant noise from his ankle. He had only jumped from the second story and it did not feel broken, but he had hurt his ankle a bit all the same.

He heard the roar of flames absorbing oxygen coming from above.

“!?”

Kamijou scrambled along the ground, kicking bicycles over as he did so, but nothing more happened.

“?”

Kamijou looked up with a puzzled look.

Still making the roaring noise, Innocentius was clinging to the second story railing and staring at Kamijou who was on the ground. It was almost like there was an invisible wall keeping it from following Kamijou.

Apparently, the runes had only been placed on the dorm building. Kamijou had managed to escape Stiyl’s flames by leaving the building.

Seeing that aspect of the runes made him feel like he now knew a bit about the invisible system of magic. He was not against a ridiculous opponent like the magicians in RPGs who could do anything by chanting a spell. Instead, his opponent acted based on set rules similar to the espers Kamijou knew.

He sighed.

Having been freed from any direct threat to his life, strength left Kamijou’s body. He sat down on the ground without even thinking. He was not afraid. Instead, he was assaulted with a different feeling that was more like a languid exhaustion. He started to wonder if he could escape all danger if he just ran away.

“I know. Anti-Skill,” Kamijou muttered.

Why had he not thought of it before? Academy City’s Anti-Skill were something like an anti-esper special unit. Kamijou could just notify them rather than risk his own life.

Kamijou checked his pants pocket, but his cell phone had been crushed under his very own foot that morning.

Kamijou looked out toward the road. He was looking for a pay phone.

He was not doing it to run away.

He was not doing it to run away.

“*—Then will you follow me to the depths of hell?*”

And yet those words still seemed to stab into his chest.

He was not doing anything wrong. He was not doing anything wrong, and yet...

In that very same situation, Index had gone back for Kamijou Touma. Kamijou just could not think about going down to hell with a stranger he had known for less than half an hour.

"Dammit. That's right. If I don't want to follow you to the depths of hell," Kamijou smiled, "then I just have to drag you back out from them."

He thought it was about time he understood that.

He did not know how magic worked, but he did not need to know what was going on where he could not see. He could send an email without needing the circuit diagram of his cell phone.

"*...Huh. Once you understand that, it's really not that big of a deal.*"

He knew what he had to do, so now he just needed to try it.

Even if he failed, it was still much better than doing nothing.

A metal railing warped and glowing orange fell down and Kamijou frantically rolled out of the way.

He may have made up his mind, but he still had to do something about that Innocentius before he could save Index. The real problem was the tens of thousands of runes. But could he really tear off all of those scraps of paper taped to the building?

"...Y'know, I'm surprised the fire alarm hasn't gone off with all of this going on."

It had just been an offhand comment, but Kamijou Touma froze in place once he said it.

The fire alarm?

♦

The fire alarms installed around the building all went off at once.

"!?"

Amid that storm of roaring noise that sounded as loud as a bombing raid, Stiyl looked up at the ceiling.

Without a second's delay, the attached sprinklers sent out a typhoon-like manmade rain. Since having the firefighters called in would be a pain, Stiyl had written his orders for Innocentius such that it would not touch the security sensors. That meant Kamijou Touma must have hit the button for the fire alarm.

Did he think it would put out Innocentius' flames?

"..."

The notion was almost laughably ridiculous, but the magician thought the blood vessels in his head would burst when he thought about how he was getting soaked for such a stupid reason.

Stiyl stared at the red fire alarm on the wall in annoyance.

It was easy enough to set the alarm off, but he could not stop it himself. As it was summer break, most of the residents of the dorm were out, but it could get bothersome if the firefighters came.

"...Hm."

Stiyl looked around the area and then quickly picked up Index and left. His goal was simply to recover Index, so there was no reason to get caught up in killing Kamijou. Given how long it would take for the firefighters to arrive, he could leave Innocentius on auto-chase and the boy would get a nice flaming embrace that would turn him into black charcoal or white ash.

(This doesn't mean the elevator is stopped, does it?)

He had heard that elevators were made to stop during emergencies. That would be quite depressing for Stiyl. He was on the seventh floor. Even if it was a girl, carrying an unconscious person down stairs was tiring.

That was why Stiyl was initially relieved to hear the microwave oven-like ding come from behind him.

But then he came to his senses.

Who was it? Who was on the elevator?

It was the evening of summer vacation and he had already checked to make sure all of the students had left the dorm, leaving it deserted. So who was it and why did they need the elevator?

The doors of the elevator clanked as they opened up. A single footstep on the floor wet from the sprinklers reverberated through the passageway.

Stiyl slowly turned around.

He had no idea why his body was trembling on the inside.

Kamijou Touma stood there.

(What? What happened to Innocentius?)

Thoughts whirled around chaotically in Stiyl's head. Innocentius was like a cutting edge missile loaded in a fighter. After it locked on, it could never be escaped. No matter where you ran or hid, it would use its three-thousand-degree flames to melt through walls or obstacles, even if they were made of steel, and continue after you. It was not something that could be escaped just by running around a building.

And yet Kamijou Touma stood there.

He stood there unfazed, unstoppable, unassailable, and most of all, an unequivocal natural enemy.

"Come to think of it, runes are supposed to be carved into the walls and the floor, right?" said Kamijou as the cold manmade rain poured down on him. "Really, you're damn amazing. To be honest, I would've had no way to win if you had carved them with a knife. Feel free to brag about this all you want."

As he spoke, Kamijou Touma raised his right arm and pointed at above his head.

He pointed at the ceiling. At the sprinkler.

"...You can't mean! Those three-thousand-degree flames couldn't be put out with that!"

"Don't be stupid. Not the flames. *How can you put those things all over people's homes*?"

Stiyl then recalled the tens of thousands of rune papers he had set up on the dorm.

Paper was weak to water. Even kindergartners knew that.

By spraying water all over the building with the sprinklers, it did not matter if there were tens of thousands of the runes. He did not need to run around the building. Instead, he could press a single button and destroy all of the scraps of paper.

The muscles of the magician's face spasmed.

"Innocentius!"

The instant he shouted that, the elevator door behind Kamijou melted like a sugar sculpture and the giant flame god crawled out into the passageway.

Each time the raindrops hit its body of flames, they evaporated with the sound of a beast's breathing.

"Ha ha ha. Ah ha ha ha ha ha! Amazing! You have the battle sense of a genius! But you lack experience. Copy paper is not the same as toilet paper. *Just getting it a bit wet isn't*

going to completely dissolve it!" The magician spread his arms while laughter exploded from his mouth and he shouted, "Kill him!"

Innocentius swung its arm like a hammer.

"Out of the way."

Kamijou Touma made that one statement. He did not even turn around.

Kamijou's right hand touched the giant flame god in a backhanded blow and it exploded in all direction with a laughably pathetic noise.

"Wha-!?"

Stiyl Magnus's heart truly did stop for an instant out of shock.

After being blown away, Innocentius did not revive. Black fuel oil-like chunks of flesh were splattered about the area and all they could do was just barely squirm a bit.

"Im...possible... How...How! My runes haven't been destroyed yet!"

"What about the ink?" It seemed to take 5 years for Kamijou Touma's voice to reach Stiyl's ears. "Even if the copy paper hasn't been destroyed, the water will make the ink come off." Kamijou spoke in a leisurely manner. "Although that doesn't seem to have taken care of every single one of them."

The squirming pieces of Innocentius disappeared into thin air one at a time as the manmade rain continued to flow from the sprinklers.

It was as if the ink on the copy paper taped all over the building was coming off in the rain one by one, causing Innocentius to lose power bit by bit.

The chunks of flesh disappeared one by one until finally the last one dissolved and disappeared.

"Innocentius...Innocentius!"

The magician's words were like those of a man shouting into a phone receiver after being hung up on.

"Now then."

That one statement was enough to make the magician's entire body flinch.

Kamijou Touma took a step toward Stiyl Magnus.

"Inno...centius..." the magician said...but nothing in the world responded.

Kamijou Touma took another step toward Stiyl Magnus.

“Innocentius...Innocentius, Innocentius!” the magician shouted...but nothing in the world changed.

Kamijou Touma finally started charging toward Stiyl Magnus like a bullet.

“A-Ash to ash, dust to dust, Squeamish Bloody Rood!” the magician finally roared, but not even a sword of flames appeared, much less the giant flame god.

Kamijou Touma drew near Stiyl Magnus and then continued even closer.

He clenched his fist.

He clenched his utterly normal right hand. He clenched his right hand that would be of no use unless he was using it on some kind of supernatural power. He clenched his right hand that would not let him defeat even a single delinquent, that would not raise his scores on tests, and that would not make him popular with girls.

But his right hand could also be quite useful.

After all, he could use it to punch out the bastard standing before him.

Kamijou Touma’s fist slammed into the magician’s face.

The magician’s body rotated like a bamboo copter and the back of his head struck the metal railing.

CHAPTER 2

The Illusionist Bestows Demise.

The_7th-Edge.

Part 1

It was night. The sirens of fire trucks and an ambulance rang from the main road and passed by.

The dorm seemed to have been mostly abandoned, but setting off the fire alarm and starting the sprinklers had changed matters. In no time at all, the empty dorm was filled with fire trucks and onlookers.

Kamijou had used his right hand to destroy the tracking function of the hood in his room before taking it with him. If he had left it working and abandoned it in some arbitrary place, he could have fooled the pursuers, but she obstinately insisted that she take it with her.

Kamijou Touma clicked his tongue in a back alley. He was holding Index's bloody form in his arms as he could not let her wound touch the dirty ground.

He could not give Index to an ambulance.

Academy City fundamentally disliked outsiders. That was why walls surrounded the city and three satellites were constantly monitoring everything. Even the drivers of the trucks that supplied convenience stores needed an exclusive ID to get in.

For that reason, information on an outsider without an ID like Index would get out if she was hospitalized.

And her enemy was part of an organization.

If she was attacked there, the damage would spread to those around her and she would be defenseless if she was attacked while recovering or in surgery.

"But I can't just leave her like this."

"I'll...be fine. If you...can only stop the bleeding..."

Index's voice was weak and showed no hint of the mechanical voice she used while explaining about runes.

And that was why Kamijou knew immediately what she had said was wrong. Her wound was beyond something an amateur could handle by wrapping a bandage around it. Kamijou was used to fights, so he performed first aid on himself for most of the wounds best kept a secret. But the wound on her back was bad enough to make even Kamijou lose his cool.

There was only one thing left they could rely on.

He still did not believe in it, but he had nothing else left to believe in.

"Hey, hey! Can you hear me?" Kamijou lightly slapped at Index's cheek. "Is there anything that can heal wounds in those 103,000 grimoires of yours?"

Kamijou's idea of magic was nothing more than the attack magic and recovery magic from RPGs.

It was true Index had said she was naturally unable to handle magic power herself and therefore could not use magic, but Kamijou could handle supernatural powers, so if Index just told him what to do...

Index's breathing was shallow but more due to the blood loss than to pain. Her pale lips trembled.

"There is...but..."

Kamijou's face lit up for an instant until the word "but" belatedly caught in his mind.

"You...can't do it..." Index let out a small breath. "Even if I...taught you the spell...your power would surely...get in the way...ow...even if you perfectly...imitated it."

Kamijou looked down at his right hand in shock.

Imagine Breaker. The power residing there had indeed completely negated Stiyl's flames. So there was a chance it would negate Index's recovery magic in the same way.

"Shit! Not again...Why is it always this right hand's fault!?"

But that just meant he needed to call someone. Like Aogami Pierce or that Biri Biri girl Misaka Mikoto. The faces of a few tough people who he would not have to worry about getting involved in this kind of trouble floated up in his mind.

"...?" Index fell silent for a bit. "No... That isn't what I meant."

"?"

“Not your right hand...The problem is...that you’re an esper.” In that broiling night, she shivered like on a snowy mountain in midwinter. “Magic is not...something to be used by ‘talented people’ like you espers. ‘Untalented people’ wanted...to do what the ‘talented people’ could do...so they created certain spells and rituals...that are known as magic.”

Kamijou was about ready to shout, “This is no time for explanations!”

“You don’t get it...? *The circuitry is different between ‘talented people’ and ‘untalented people’*... ‘Talented people’ cannot use the systems created...for the ‘untalented people’...”

“Wha-...?”

Kamijou was left speechless. It was true that drugs and electrodes were used on espers like Kamijou to *forcibly expand the circuitry of their brains in a way that was different from a normal human*. It was true that their bodies were *different from others*.

But he could not believe it. No, he did not *want to* believe it.

2.3 million students lived in Academy City. And every single one of them had undergone the esper development Curriculum. Even if you could not tell by looking at them, even if they could not bend a spoon when trying so hard it burst the blood vessels in their brain, and *even if they were the weakest of espers, they were indeed made differently from a normal person.*

In other words, the people who lived in that city could not use magic, the one thing that could save that girl.

There was a way to save the person who lay before him, and yet no one could save her.

“Dammit...” Kamijou bared his canines like a beast. “How could this happen? How could this happen!? What the hell is this!? How is this fair!?”

Index’s trembling grew worse.

What Kamijou found the hardest to bear was that *she was receiving the punishment for his own inability*.

“‘Talented’ my ass,” he spat out. “I can’t even save the girl suffering before my eyes.”

But he could not come up with any other way of resolving the situation. The fact that the 2.3 million students living in the city could not use magic was the rule he needed to break down first.

“...?”

Kamijou suddenly noticed something off about what he had thought.

Students?

“Hey, any normal ‘talentless’ person can use magic, right?”

“...Eh? Yes.”

“And this isn’t going to end with it being useless because the person has no talent for magic, right?”

“You don’t...need to worry about that... As long as they prepare correctly and perform it correctly...even a middle school student should be able to do it.” Index thought for a bit. “Although, if they get the steps wrong, the pathways in their brain and their neural circuitry could be fried...But with the knowledge of my 103,000 grimoires, it will be fine. Do not worry.”

Kamijou smiled.

Without thinking, he looked up as if to howl at the moon in the night sky.

It was true that 2.3 million students lived in Academy City and that they had all been developed to have some kind of esper power.

But the teachers that developed them were normal humans.

“I hope she isn’t already asleep.”

The face of a certain teacher appeared in Kamijou Touma’s mind.

It was the face of Tsukuyomi Komoe, the 135 centimeter homeroom teacher of his class who a red randoseru would suit despite her being a teacher. [11]

♦

Kamijou used a pay phone to get Komoe-sensei’s address from Aogami Pierce. (Kamijou had dropped and broken his phone that morning. Why Aogami Pierce knew Komoe’s address was a mystery. Kamijou suspected he was a stalker.) Kamijou then began walking with Index’s limp form on his back.

“This is the place...”

He arrived after fifteen minutes of walking from that back alley.

[11] A randoseru is a backpack that is commonly used by Japanese elementary schoolchildren.

Utterly unbefitting of Komoe-sensei's twelve year old appearance, it was a two story wooden apartment building that looked so old and worn down Kamijou felt it must have weathered the bombing of Tokyo. Since the washing machine was sitting directly out in the passageway, it must have had nothing like a bath.

Normally, Kamijou would have made jokes about it for the next ten minutes, but he did not even smile.

After checking the nameplates on the first floor doors, he climbed up the run-down and rusty metal staircase and checked the doors up there. When he reached the farthest back door on the second floor, he finally found "Tsukuyomi Komoe" written in hiragana.

Kamijou rang the doorbell twice and then kicked at the door with all his might.

His foot striking the door made a tremendous noise.

However, the door did not so much as budge. True to form, Kamijou had the misfortune to think he heard an unpleasant crack come from his big toe.

"~ ~ ~!!"

"Yes, yes, yeees! The anti-newspaper salesman door is the only sturdy thing here. I'll open it, okay?"

(Why didn't I just wait?)

As Kamijou had that teary-eyed though, the door clicked open and a pajama wearing Komoe-sensei's head poked out through the crack. Her relaxed expression made it clear she could not see Index's back wound from her position.

"Wah, Kamijou-chan. Did you start working part time as a newspaper salesman?"

"What newspaper has its workers solicit people with a nun on their back?" said Kamijou with displeasure. "I'm in a bit of trouble, so I'll be coming in. Excuse me."

"W-wait, wait, wait!" Komoe-sensei frantically tried to block Kamijou's way as he pushed her aside. "I-I can't have you suddenly coming into my room. And that isn't just because my room is a horrible mess with empty beer cans littering the floor and cigarette butts piled up in the ash tray!"

"Sensei."

"Yes?"

"...See if you can make the same joke after seeing what I'm carrying on my back."

“I-I wasn’t joking! ...Gyahhh!?”

“So now you notice it!”

“I didn’t see you had such a bad wound on your back, Kamijou-chan!”

Komoe-sensei started panicking at the sudden sight of blood and Kamijou finally managed to push her aside and enter the room.

It looked like a room belonging to a middle aged man who loved betting on horse races. The badly worn tatami mats had countless empty beer cans strewn across them, and the silver ash tray had a veritable mountain of cigarette butts in it. In what seemed like some kind of joke, there was even a tea table of the type a stubborn father would flip over in the middle of the room.

“...I see. So you weren’t joking.”

“I suppose it is hardly the time, but do you have a problem with girls who smoke?”

Kamijou felt that was hardly the problem with it as he stared at his homeroom teacher who looked twelve and kicked some beer cans out of the way to clear an open spot. He was reluctant to sit on the worn tatami mat, but there was no time to worry about preparing a futon.

He laid Index face down on the floor to ensure her wound did not touch the floor.

The way her clothes were torn hid the actual wound from view, but a dark red liquid was flowing out like fuel oil.

“Sh-shouldn’t you call an ambulance? Th-the phone is over there.”

Komoe-sensei pointed toward a corner of the room with a trembling hand. For some reason, her phone was a black rotary dial phone.

“The mana in the blood is flowing out along with the blood.”

Kamijou and Komoe-sensei reflexively turned toward Index.

Index was still sprawled out limply on the floor, but her eyes were silently open even as her head lay on its side like a broken doll.

Her eyes were colder than the pale moonlight and more precise than the gears of a clock.

Her eyes were so perfectly serene that they looked inhuman.

“Warning: Chapter 2, Verse 6. The loss of the life force known as mana due to blood loss has exceeded a certain amount, so John’s Pen is being forcibly awoken. ...If the current situation persists, my body will lose the bare minimum of necessary life force and expire in about fifteen minutes according to the international standard minute defined by the clock tower in London. It would be best if you followed the instructions I am about to give in order to perform the most efficient treatment.”

Komoe-sensei stared at Index in shock.

Kamijou could hardly blame her. Even though he had heard that voice once before, he simply could not get used to it.

“Now then...”

Kamijou looked over at Komoe-sensei and thought.

If he out and out asked her to use magic, she would surely tell him it was hardly the time to be pretending to be a magical girl and that she was much too old for that kind of thing anyway.

So how was he supposed to convince her?

“Hmm. Sensei, sensei. Since it’s an emergency, I’ll keep this short. I need to tell you a secret, so come over here.”

“What?”

Kamijou waved his hand like he was calling over a small dog and Komoe-sensei approached with no caution whatsoever.

“Sorry,” Kamijou apologized to Index under his breath.

He lifted up her ripped clothes to reveal the horrible wound hidden beneath.

“Ee!?”

He could hardly blame Komoe-sensei for jumping in shock.

The wound was so bad it even shocked Kamijou. The wound was in a horizontal straight line across her back as if it was a cardboard box someone had used a ruler and box cutter on. Past the red blood, pink muscle, yellow fat, and even something hard and white that seemed to be her backbone could be seen.

If the wound was viewed as a red mouth, the lips around it had gone utterly pale like someone who had been in a pool.

“Gh...” Kamijou forced away some dizziness and carefully lowered the clothing that was wet with blood.

Even when the clothes touched the wound, Index’s icy eyes did not move in the slightest.

“Sensei.”

“Eh? Yes!?”

“I am going to call an ambulance. In that time, you listen to what this girl has to say and do whatever she says...Just make sure she does not lose consciousness. As you can see from her clothes, she is religious. Thanks.”

If she viewed it as nothing more than consoling the girl, she could continue to view magic as impossible. For that reason, Kamijou had changed the focus in Komoe-sensei’s mind from treating the wound to continuing the conversation by any means necessary.

Komoe-sensei was nodding with an extremely serious expression and a pale face.

The one problem was that Kamijou had to kill time outside while it happened.

If an ambulance arrived before the magic was complete, the “consolation” would end. That meant he could not actually call an ambulance.

But that alone did not mean Kamijou had to leave. After all, he could just call 117 with the room’s black phone and pretend to be calling an ambulance while actually speaking to a recording.

The real problem lay elsewhere.

“Hey, Index,” Kamijou said softly to Index as she remained collapsed on the floor. “Is there anything I can do?”

“There is not. The best option would be for you to leave.”

Her overly clear and direct wording made Kamijou clench his right fist so hard it hurt.

There was nothing Kamijou could do.

And it was all because of his right hand that would negate the recovery magic merely by being in the room.

“...Then, sensei. I’m gonna go look for a pay phone.”

“Wait...eh? Kamijou-chan, I have a phone he-...”

Kamijou ignored Komoe-sensei's words, opened the door, and left the room.

He gritted his teeth at the fact that *he could do nothing but leave.*

Kamijou ran through the city at night.

As he ran, he clenched his right hand that could negate even the systems of God but could not protect a single person.

♦

After Kamijou Touma left the room, Index moved her pale lips.

"What is the current time in Japan Standard Time? Also, what is the date?"

"It is 8:30 PM on July 20..."

"You did not seem to look at a clock. Is that time accurate?"

"I do not have a clock in my room, but my internal clock is accurate down to the second, so do not worry."

"..."

"You don't need to doubt me that much. I have heard that some jockeys have internal clocks accurate to a tenth of a second and you can regulate it with certain eating habits and rhythms of activity," replied Komoe-sensei in puzzlement.

She may not have been an esper, but she was indeed a resident of Academy City. The idea of what level of knowledge was normal from medical and scientific fronts was different between those within the city and those without.

Still lying face down on the floor, Index glanced out the window with only her eyes.

"From the location of the stars and angle of the moon...that matches the direction of Sirius with an error of 0.038. Now to check once more. The current time in Japan Standard Time is July 20 8:30 PM, is that correct?"

"Yes. Well, technically it is now 53 seconds past that, but...Ah, no!! Don't get up!!"

Komoe-sensei frantically tried to push Index back down as she tried to sit up which would further damage her already injured body, but Index's gaze did not waver in the slightest.

Her gaze was neither frightening nor piercing.

All emotion had simply disappeared from her eyes like a light switch had been turned off.

There was no real presence in her eyes.

It was like her soul was missing.

“It is no matter. It can be regenerated,” said Index as she headed for the tea table in the center of the room. “It is near the end of Cancer. The time is between eight and midnight. The direction is west. Under the protection of Undine, the role of the angel is the cherub...”

The sound of Komoe-sensei gulping could be heard throughout the room.

Unexpectedly, Index started drawing some kind of figure atop the small tea table with her bloody finger. Even those who did not know what a magic circle was would recognize that it was something religious. Komoe-sensei had already grown timid, but now something overwhelmed her to the point that she could not speak.

After drawing a circle of blood that filled the tea table, Index drew a star-shaped symbol known as a pentagram.

Writing in some strange language was written all around it. Those words were likely the same thing Index was muttering. She had asked about the constellations and time because the words written changed depending on the time and season.

As Index put together her magic, she showed none of the weakness of one who was injured.

Her extreme focus made it seem like her sense of pain had been temporarily cut off altogether.

A silent chill ran down Komoe-sensei’s back as she heard the dripping of blood coming from the girl’s back.

“Wh-wh-wh-what is this?”

“Magic.” Index paused after that one word. “I will now be needing your help and your body. If you do as I say, no one will meet any misfortune and you will not be the target of anyone’s resentment.”

“H-how can you say that so calmly!? Just lie down and wait for the ambulance! Umm...bandages, bandages. With a wound this bad, I should bind the area around the artery to stop the flow of blood...”

“That level of treatment cannot completely close up my wound. I am not familiar with the term ambulance, but is it capable of completely closing this wound in the next fifteen minutes and supplying me with the needed level of mana?”

"..."

It was true that an ambulance would take ten minutes to arrive even if they called right that instant. It would take that long again to get her back to the hospital and the treatment would not start the second she arrived at the hospital. Komoe-sensei did not really understand what an occult term like mana meant, but it was true just closing the wound would not bring back her stamina.

Even if the wound was closed right that instant with a needle and thread, would that pale girl be too weak to live long enough to recover her missing stamina?

"Please," said Index without changing her expression in the slightest.

A mix of fresh blood and saliva was dripping from the corner of her mouth.

There was no intensity in her. There was nothing ghastly in her either. But that calm and composure was scarier than either of those. The way everything she did seemed to widen the wound made her seem like a broken machine continuing to run without realizing anything was amiss.

(If I do anything that makes her resist, her situation could become even worse.)

Komoe-sensei sighed. She of course did not believe in magic. However, Kamijou had told her to keep the conversation going to make sure the girl did not lose consciousness.

All she could do was try not to provoke the girl sitting before her and place her hopes in Kamijou calling an ambulance as quickly as possible if not sooner and in the splendid first aid of the EMTs in the ambulance.

"So what should I do? I am not a magical girl."

"I thank you for your cooperation. First...take that...that...what is that black thing?"

"? Oh, that is a video game memory card."

"??? ...Well, fine. At any rate, take that black thing and place it in the middle of the table."

"Technically, it's a tea table..."

Komoe-sensei did as she was told and placed the memory card in the middle of the tea table. She then took a mechanical pencil lead case, an empty box of chocolates, and two small paperback books and put them on the tea table as well. She also took two small figurines that came with her food, and lined them up next to each other.

Komoe-sensei wondered what the point of it was, but Index was still completely serious despite looking about ready to collapse.

All of Komoe-sensei's complaints disappeared before the Japanese sword-like gaze coming from that pale face.

"What is this? You called it magic, but isn't this just playing with dolls?"

Sure enough, it all looked like a miniature version of the room. The memory card was the tea table, the two books standing up were the bookshelf and closet, and the two figurines were in the exact place of the two people in the room. When glass beads were scattered over the tea table, they seemed to stop in the places that exactly replicated the beer cans scattered across the floor.

"The substances do not matter. It is the same as how a magnifying glass magnifies regardless of whether the lens is made of glass or plastic... As long as the form and role are the same, the ceremony is possible," muttered Index as she dripped with sweat. "I just need you to accurately carry out my instructions. If you mistake the order, the pathways in your brain and your neural circuitry could be fried."

"???"

"I am saying that failure will turn your body to mincemeat and kill you. Please be careful."

"Bh!?" Komoe-sensei almost spat out, but Index continued without paying it any heed.

"We will now create a temple for the angel to descend into. Follow my lead and chant."

What Index said after that went beyond words and become nothing but sound.

Without thinking about the meaning, Komoe-sensei tried copying just the tone in something like humming or singing.

And...

"Kyahh!?"

Suddenly, the figures on top of the tea table started to "sing" as well. "Kyahh!?" one of them screamed with the exact same timing. The figures were vibrating. Just as the vibration is transmitted along the string in a string telephone and comes out as a voice in the paper cup on the other end, the figure vibrated and reproduced Komoe-sensei's voice.

The reason Komoe-sensei did not panic and run from the room right then and there was likely because she lived in a city with 2.3 million espers in it. A normal person would have thought they were out of their mind.

“Link complete.” Index’s voice and the voice from the tea table made it sound double. “The temple created on the table has been linked to this room. To put it simply, everything that happens in this room will happen on the table and everything that happens on the table will happen in this room.”

Index pushed the tea table lightly with her foot.

In that instant, the entire apartment shook under Komoe-sensei’s feet as if from some great shock.

She could feel the stuffy air of the room growing as clear as the air in a forest in the early morning.

However, nothing like an angel was present. All that was there was what could only be described as an invisible presence. A feeling assaulted Komoe-sensei’s entire body like she was being watched by thousands of eyeballs from every direction.

And then Index suddenly shouted.

“Imagine! Imagine a golden angel with the body of a child! Imagine a beautiful angel with two wings!”

When carrying out magic, determining the field was important.

For example, a pebble thrown into the sea does not make much of a ripple. However, a pebble dropped into a bucket makes quite a ripple. It was the same as that. To alter the world with magic, the field in which the alteration would take place had to be demarcated.

A protector was a temporary god in a small demarcated world.

If one properly imagined a protector, fixated its form, and freely controlled it, one could more easily cause mysterious things to happen in a limited field.

Komoe-sensei did not receive any such explanation and she was having a hard time imagining an angel. The term “golden angel” only made her think of that thing about one gold one or five silver ones.[12]

As the image in Komoe-sensei’s mind lost coherence, the surrounding presence followed suit and lost its form. An unpleasant feeling ran down Komoe-sensei’s back like she was wrapped in the rotten mud from the bottom of a swamp.

[12] This is a reference to Japanese candy known as Chocoballs. If you are lucky, the package will have either a gold angel or silver angel printed on it. One gold angel or five silver angels can be exchanged for a can of toys.

“Just imagine it! This will not actually call in an angel. It is just a gathering of invisible mana. It will take form according to your will as the magic user!”

She must have truly been desperate because even the voice of that cool, mechanical Index grew sharp as an icicle.

Komoe-sensei’s eyes opened wide at that sudden change and she hurriedly started muttering under her breath.

(...A cute angel, a cute angel, a cute angel.)

Hazily, she frantically called up an image of the girl angel she had seen in a shoujo manga long ago.

Whatever it was that felt like invisible mud hanging in the air of the room took form as if it had been shoved inside a human-shaped balloon...or at least that was how it seemed to Komoe-sensei.

She timidly opened her eyes to check.

(...Huh? *This will not actually call in an angel*?)

In the instant that doubt entered her mind, the human-shaped water balloon burst and the invisible mud splattered across the room.

“Kyahh!!”

“...The fixation of its form has failed.” Index looked around with her sharp gaze. “If the temple is at least protected by a blue color Undine, that is enough. ...Continue.”

Her words were positive enough, but Index’s eyes were not smiling in the slightest.

Komoe-sensei flinched back like a child whose parents had just seen a failed test she had tried to keep hidden.

“Chant. It will be over with just a bit more.”

That sharp order would not let Komoe-sensei lose her composure despite her rising confusion and flagging thoughts.

Index, Komoe-sensei, and the two figurines on the tea table sang.

The back of Index’s figurine on the table began to melt.

It was as if it was rubber being held up to a lighter. It melted, the surface lost its unevenness, it grew smooth, it cooled and hardened once more, and its form came back together.

Komoe-sensei felt like her heart was freezing over.

Currently, Index was sitting across the tea table from her.

She did not have the courage to circle around and see what was happening to Index's back.

Index's pale face was covered in oily sweat.

Her glassy eyes still showed no sign of pain or suffering.

"Replenishment of mana and stabilization of condition confirmed. Returning John's Pen to dormant mode."

Like a switch had been flipped, a soft light returned to Index's eyes.

Like a fire being lit in a cooled fireplace, a warmth filled the room's atmosphere.

The look in Index's eyes was so kind and warm that Komoe-sensei could not help but feel that warmth. It was the look of a normal girl.

"Now if the descended protector is returned and the temple is destroyed, it will be over." Index smiled painfully "This is what magic is. It's the same as how apple and ringo[13] mean the same thing. You do not need a glass wand when a plastic umbrella is just as clear. It is the same with tarot cards. As long as the design and numbers match, you can perform divinations with the cut outs from the back of a shoujo manga."

Index's sweating did not stop.

Komoe-sensei grew even more afraid. She started to think what she had done had only made Index's condition worse.

"Don't worry." Index looked about ready to collapse even then. "It's the same as with a cold. You need your own strength to get over it. The wound itself has been closed up, so I'll be fine."

As soon as she said that, Index collapsed to the side. The figurine fell over, too. The tea table shook slightly and the room linked to it was assaulted by a thundering tremble.

Komoe-sensei was about to run around the tea table to Index, but Index began to sing.

When Komoe-sensei followed along and sang one last song, the strange atmosphere returned to being the normal stuffy atmosphere of the apartment. Komoe-sensei cautiously shook the tea table, but nothing happened.

[13] Ringo is Japanese for apple.

(Thank goodness.)

As Komoe-sensei closed her eyes in relief, Index spoke.

Komoe-sensei would have thought anyone would be glad to have their deadly wound healed, but the nun said something else.

"*I'm glad I did not burden anyone with anything*."

Komoe-sensei stared at Index in surprise.

"*...If I had died here, he may have had to bear the burden*."

Index closed her eyes like she was dreaming and said nothing more. When that girl had been sliced in the back and collapsed and when she had performed that strange ritual, she had never once been thinking about herself. She had been thinking about the person who had carried her there.

Komoe-sensei could not think in the same way. She had no one to think that way about.

That was why she asked one thing.

She was sure Index was already asleep and would not hear her, but that was exactly why she asked it.

And yet the girl answered with her eyes still closed.

"I don't know."

She had never felt that way about anyone before and she did not know what the feeling was. But when he had recklessly gotten mad for her when faced with that magician, she had wanted him to run away even if she had to crawl up to him and make him. And when he had run away from Innocentius, she had thought she was going to cry when he had returned.

She did not really understand, but when she was with him, nothing ever went as she wanted and she felt pushed around.

And yet those unexpected things were so much fun and made her so happy.

She did not know what the feeling was, though.

This time, Index fell into a deep sleep with a smile on her face like she was having a pleasant dream.

Part 2

After dawn came, her symptoms were very similar to those of a cold.

Index was bedridden with a high fever and a headache. She did not have a runny nose or a sore throat because it was not due to a virus. It was simply a matter of regaining her missing stamina, so no matter how much immunity-strengthening cold medicine she took, it would not solve anything.

"...So why are you wearing only panties down below?"

As Index lay with a wet towel on her forehead, she must not have been able to stand the hot dampness inside the futon, so she had one leg sticking out in Kamijou's direction. She was wearing a pale green pajama top and yet her bright skin-colored thigh was sticking out up to its base. Due to her fever, the skin was a bit pink.

The towel had grown lukewarm, so Komoe-sensei stuck it into a basin of water and splashed it around while glaring at Kamijou.

"...Kamijou-chan. I think those clothes were a bit too much."

"Those clothes" likely referred to the safety-pin-covered white nun's habit.

Kamijou agreed with her 100% on that, but Index looked like a displeased cat over having her familiar habit taken from her.

"The real question is how the pajamas of a beer-loving heavy-smoking adult like you fit Index so perfectly. Just what is the age difference between you anyway?"

"Wha-?"

Komoe-sensei (age unknown) was at a loss for words, but Index went in to kick her while she was down.

"Please do not look down on me like that. These pajamas are actually a bit tight around the chest."

"What...impossible! That can't be right. Now you're just making fun of me!" protested Komoe-sensei.

"Actually, do you even have anything in the chest area for it to be tight around!?" asked Kamijou.

"..."

"..."

As the two ladies glared at him, Kamijou's soul reflexively entered prostration mode.

"Right, right. By the way, Kamijou-chan, who exactly is this girl?"

"My little sister."

"That is a blatant lie. With that silver hair and those green eyes, she is clearly a foreigner!"

"She's my stepsister."

"...You're a pervert?"

"I'm just kidding! I'm well aware that a *step*sister is bad manners but a *real* sister is against the rules!"

"Kamijou-chan," she said, suddenly switching over to her teacher voice.

Kamijou fell silent. It was not really surprising that Komoe-sensei wanted to know what was going on. Not only had he brought a strange foreigner to her, but the girl had had a blade wound on her back that clearly smelled of bad news and Komoe-sensei had even been made to take part in some strange bit of magic.

It would have been difficult to ask her to turn a blind eye to it all.

"Sensei, can I ask one thing?"

"What?"

"Are you asking so you can tell Anti-Skill or Academy City's board of directors?"

"Yes," Komoe-sensei said immediately with a nod. With no hesitation, she had told her student she was going to sell them out. "I do not know what kind of situation you two are in." Komoe-sensei smiled. "But if it happened here in Academy City, it is our duty as teachers to resolve it. Taking responsibility for the children is the duty of the adults. Now that I know you are in some kind of trouble, I cannot sit idly by."

That was what Tsukuyomi Komoe said.

And yet she had no power, no strength, and no duty to do so.

She merely said it with the straightforwardness of a famous katana slicing straight through the proper place at the proper time.

"I just..." started Kamijou before finishing under his breath. (...can't stand up to her.)

Kamijou had lived a long fifteen or so years and yet he had never seen someone else like that teacher of the type seen in dramas and not even seen in movies anymore.

And so...

“If you were a complete stranger, I would not hesitate to get you involved, but I owe you for that magic, so I can’t let you get involved.”

Kamijou’s response was just as straightforward.

He had already had enough of seeing people who were willing to protect others for nothing in return be hurt before his eyes.

Komoe-sensei fell silent for a bit.

“Mhh. I am not going to let you get away with trying to trick me with some cool line.”

“...? Sensei, why did you just stand up and head for the door?”

“I am giving this a stay of execution. I need to go to the supermarket for groceries. Kamijou-chan, you figure out exactly what it is you need to tell me in that time. And...”

“And?”

“I may get so caught up in shopping that I forget. No cheating when I get back. Make sure you tell me, okay?”

Kamijou thought Komoe-sensei was smiling as she said that.

With the sound of the apartment door opening and then closing, Kamijou and Index were left alone in the room.

(She’s trying to be kind.)

From the smile of a child plotting something on her face, Kamijou had a feeling Komoe-sensei would have “forgotten everything” once she returned from the supermarket.

If he later decided to consult her about it, she would surely act furious and say “Why didn’t you tell me sooner!? I completely forgot!” as she happily agreed to help.

With a sigh, Kamijou turned toward Index who lay in the futon.

“...Sorry. I know this is no time to be worried about appearances.”

“Don’t worry about it. This is for the best.” Index shook her head. “It would be wrong to get her any more involved. ...And she cannot use any more magic.”

“?”

Kamijou frowned.

“Grimoires are dangerous. Written in them is aberrant and uncommon knowledge as well as twisted laws that break the common laws of this world. Whether they are for good or evil, those things are toxic in this world. Merely learning knowledge of a ‘different world’ will destroy the brain of the one who learns it,” explained Index.

Kamijou tried to translate that in a way he understood.

(So is it like forcefully running a program that is not compatible with that computer’s OS?)

“My brain and spirit are protected by religious barriers, and magicians who attempt to exceed being human must exceed the boundaries of their own common knowledge to arrive at the desired state of mind which could almost be likened to a type of insanity. However, for a normal person from a weakly religious country like Japan, it could all be over after just casting one more spell.”

“I-I see...” Kamijou somehow managed to not let the shock he had received show. “Well, that’s a shame. I was hoping she would be able to perform alchemy for me. You know alchemy, right? It can turn lead into gold.”

He of course omitted the fact that he knew this from an item mixing RPG with a young female alchemist as its protagonist.

“Well, there is a technique for that called Limen Magna, but preparing the tools with modern materials would cost...um...seven trillion yen in this country’s currency.”

“.....Well, that definitely isn’t worth it,” muttered Kamijou soullessly.

Index smiled weakly and said, “...Yeah. Turning lead into gold accomplishes nothing more than making nobles happy.”

“But...wait. Now that I think about it, what does that do? How does it work? If you’re turning lead into gold, are you rearranging the Pb atoms into Au?”

“I don’t really know, but it’s only a fourteenth century technique.”

“Wait, do you mean what I think you mean? It might actually be changing the atomic arrangement!? You mean you could cause proton decay without a particle accelerator and nuclear fusion without a nuclear reactor!? Wait just a second. I’m not even sure the seven Level 5s of Academy City could do that!”

“???”

“Wait, don’t look so confused! Um...um...Ah. If you’re wondering just how amazing that would be, that kind of thing would let us easily create atomic robots or mobile suits!”

“What are those?”

With those three words she cast aside all of the dreams of men.

As Kamijou’s head hung down limply, Index seemed to feel she had done something wrong.

“A-anyway, the holy swords and magic wands used in ceremonies can be made with modern materials as substitutes, but there is a limit. ...This especially goes for sacred items related to God such as the Lance of Longinus, Joseph’s Holy Grail, or The_ROOD. Even after a thousand years, it seems no substitutes can be made...ow...”

As she talked on and on excitedly, she started holding her temple like she had a hangover.

Kamijou Touma looked at Index’s face as she lay in the futon.

She had 103,000 grimoires in her head. Just reading one of them could drive you insane and yet she had put each and every letter of all those books in her head. How much pain had that process caused her?

And yet Index never once complained of her pain.

“Do you want to know?” she asked as if apologizing to Kamijou and while ignoring her own pain.

Index’s usual cheerful tone had set a context that made that quiet voice stand out and seem to hold even more determination.

(Sensei, you idiot.)

Index’s situation did not particularly matter to Kamijou. Whatever situation she might be in, there was no way he could abandon her. As long as he could defeat her enemies and keep her safe, he saw no reason to dig into her old wounds.

“Do you want to know what my circumstances are?” repeated the girl naming herself Index.

Kamijou made up his mind and replied, “That kinda makes me feel like a priest, y’know?”

In a way, it really did. He felt like a priest listening to the confessions of a sinner.

“Do you know why?” Index asked. “The Christian Church was originally a single organization, but now there are the Catholics, the Protestants, the Roman Catholics, the Russian Orthodox, the Anglicans, the Nestorians, the Athanasians, the Gnostics, and more. Do you know why this split occurred?”

“Well...”

Kamijou had at least skimmed through his history textbook, so he had an idea what the answer was. However, he hesitated to mention it in front of the “real” Index.

“That’s good enough.” Index actually smiled. “It was because politics were mixed in with the church. Sects split, opposed each other, and fought. In the end, even people who believed in the same God were each other’s enemies. Even as we believe in the same God, we each walk a different one of many scattered paths.”

Of course, people’s ideas on things naturally differed. Some wanted to make money with the word of god while others refused to allow that. Some felt they were loved by god more than anyone else in the world while others refused to accept that.

“After the sects stopped interacting with each other, we each underwent our own isolated development which gave us our individual characteristics. We changed in accordance to the situation in or cultures of our countries.” Index let out a small breath. “The Roman Catholic Church manages and controls the world, the Russian Orthodox Church searches out and eliminates the occult, and the Anglican Church I belong to...”

Index’s words caught in her throat for a second.

“England is a magic country,” she said as if that was a bitter memory. “So the Anglican Church is especially advanced in anti-magician culture and techniques such as witch hunts and the inquisition.”

In London alone were a number of public companies calling themselves magic cabals and there were ten times that many shell corporations that really only existed on paper. Their trial and error that had begun as a means of protecting the citizens from the “evil magicians lurking in the city” had developed too far in one direction and at some point became a culture of slaughter and execution.

“The Anglican Church has a special division,” said Index as if she was confessing her own sins. “It investigates magic and develops countermeasures with which to defeat magicians. It is known as Necessarius.” She sounded exactly like a nun. “If you do not know your enemy, you cannot defend against their attacks. However, understanding an impure enemy will make your own heart impute and touching an impure enemy will make your body impure. That is why Necessarius, the church of necessary evils, was created to draw all of those impurities into one place. And the most extreme case of this is...”

“The 103,000 grimoires.”

“Yes.” Index gave a small nod. “Magic is something like an equation. If you skillfully reverse the calculations, you can counteract your opponent’s attack. That is why I had these 103,000 grimoires put into me. ...If you know magic from all around the world, you can neutralize magic from all around the world.”

Kamijou looked down at his right hand.

He had thought his right hand was of no use. The power of his right hand would not let him defeat even a single delinquent, would not raise his scores on tests, and would not make him popular with girls, so he had mainly just ignored it.

But this girl had gone through hell to achieve the same thing.

“But if these grimoires are so dangerous and you know where they are, why don’t you just burn them without reading them? As long as there are people to read and learn from these grimoires, magicians will continue to appear without end, right?”

“The actual books are less important than the contents. Even if you got rid of an original grimoire[14], the magicians who knew the contents would pass that on to their followers, so it would be pointless. Although someone who does that is known as a sorcerer rather than a magician,” explained Index.

(Is it something like data posted on the internet? Even if you delete the original data, copy after copy of the data will continue to exist.)

“Also, a grimoire is nothing more than a textbook.” Index sounded like she was in pain. “Just reading one does not make you a magician. Magicians change it up to suit themselves and create a new type of magic.”

It was less like data and more like a constantly changing computer virus.

[14] When referring to original grimoires, the Japanese gives the English word “Origin” in furigana. This was changed to original since it’s almost the same and sounds better in English.

To completely eliminate the virus, you had to be constantly analyzing the virus and creating new antivirus software.

“As I said before, grimoires are dangerous.” Index narrowed her eyes. “When disposing just a copy, an expert Inquisitioner must sew his eyes shut to prevent pollution of his brain, and even then it takes five years of baptisms to fully rid him of the poison. The human mind cannot handle an original grimoire. The only option for the 103,000 original grimoires scattered about the world is to seal them.”

It was as if she was discussing what to do with a vast collection of leftover nuclear weapons.

Actually, *that was more or less what it was*. Most likely, the very people who had written them had not expected this.

“Tch. But can’t magic be used by any normal person excluding us espers? Then wouldn’t this spread throughout the world in no time at all?”

Kamijou recalled Stiyl’s flames. What if everyone in the world could use that kind of power? The common knowledge of that world that built its foundation on science would crumble.

“You...don’t have to worry about that. The magic cabals do not recklessly let the grimoires get out to the general public.”

“? Why not? Wouldn’t it be better for them to have more comrades to fight for them?”

“*That is exactly why*. If every single person who had a gun was friends, there would be no war.”

“...”

Just because two people knew magic did not mean they were on the same side.

It was because they knew the power of their trump cards that they did not want to recklessly create enemy magicians.

The grimoires were treated like the plans to a new weapon.

“Hmm. I think I get it.” Kamijou seemed deep in thought. “So basically, they want to get their hands on the *bomb* in your head.”

She was a library with perfect copies of the world’s 103,000 original grimoires in her head. To obtain her was to obtain all the magic in the world.

"...Right." From her voice, it sounded like she was about to die. "With the 103,000 grimoires, you would be able to twist everything in the world to your will without exception. That is what we call a Magic God."

Not the god of the demon world, but someone who had thoroughly mastered magic to the point of entering the domain of a god.

A Magic God.

(...Fuck that.)

Without realizing, Kamijou had begun gritting his back teeth. He could tell from how Index was acting that she had not had those 103,000 grimoires put into her head because she wanted to. Kamijou recalled Stiyl's flames. She lived like that for no other reason than to prevent as many victims as she could.

Kamijou could not stand how the magicians were using those feelings to their advantage and he could not stand how the church referred to her as "impure". All of them were treating a human being like a thing and Index must have seen nothing but people who did that. The fact that she still thought of everyone but herself despite that was what Kamijou could stand the least.

"...Sorry."

Kamijou had no clue what it was he was so mad about.

But that one word made him truly snap.

He lightly tapped Index on the forehead.

"...Oh, come on. Why did you not tell me about something that important?"

Index froze in place as Kamijou stared at that bedridden girl with his canines bared. Her eyes opened wide like she had done something horribly wrong and her lips frantically moved like she was trying to say something.

"But I didn't think you would believe me and I didn't want to scare you. And...um..."

Index seemed about to burst into tears and her voice grew quieter and quieter as she spoke. Kamijou could barely hear her toward the end.

Still, Kamijou heard her say "I didn't want you to hate me."

"No, fuck that!!" He literally heard a snapping noise. "Don't look down on people and come up with your own estimation of them! Church secrets? 103,000 grimoires? Yeah, that stuff is amazing and incredible. And yes, it all seems so absurd that I still don't really believe it. But..." Kamijou paused for a beat. "*Is that all?*"

Index's eyes opened wide.

Her small lips frantically moved like she was trying to say something, but no words came out.

"Don't look down on me like that. Do you really think I would call you creepy or disgusting or something just because you memorized 103,000 grimoires!? Did you think I would abandon you and run off the instant the magicians showed up? Fuck that. If that was all I was capable of, I wouldn't have taken you in the first place!"

As Kamijou spoke, he finally realized what it was he was so upset about.

Kamijou had simply wanted to be of some help to Index. He had not wanted to see Index get hurt anymore. That was all. And yet she had not let Kamijou protect her while she put herself in harm's way to protect him. Kamijou had wanted to hear her ask for help just once.

That had been frustrating for him.

So very, very frustrating.

"...Just trust me a little. Don't come up with your own estimation of people."

That was all there was to it. Even if he had not had his right hand and had been a normal person, that would have been no reason for Kamijou to back down.

No such reason could exist.

Index merely stared at Kamijou's face in astonishment for a while.

But then tears welled up in her eyes.

It was as if her eyes were made of ice and had begun to melt.

Index clenched her lips sealed to choke down the sobs, but they trembled as if she could not stand it much longer. She drew the futon up to her mouth and bit onto it. The tears in in her eyes grew so large it looked like she would have been bawling like kindergartener if was not for the blanket.

In all likelihood, those tears were not merely in response to the words Kamijou had spoken just then.

Kamijou was not conceited enough to think it was. He doubted his words had made that much of an impression on her. Most likely, something that had been building up within her had come flowing out with his words as the trigger.

Just as he felt his heart break at the thought that no one had ever said those words to her before, Kamijou also felt that he had finally seen Index's "weakness" which made him a bit happy.

But Kamijou was not the kind of pervert who enjoyed watching girls cry.

In fact, it was incredibly awkward.

If Komoe-sensei unknowingly entered at that moment, he was sure she would unhesitatingly tell him to die.

"U-um...Y'see. I have my right hand, so no magician is any match for me!"

"...But...sob...you said you have supplementary lessons during summer vacation."

"...Did I say that?"

"You definitely did."

Apparently, the girl who had perfectly memorized 103,000 books had an excellent memory.

"Don't feel bad about throwing someone's everyday life into disorder over something like this. My supplementary lessons aren't that big a deal. The school doesn't want to hold me back if they can help it, so if I ditch the supplementary lessons, I can just go to supplementary lessons for the supplementary lessons. I can put them off as long as I need to."

If Komoe-sensei had heard that, that room would likely have turned into a battlefield, but he paid that no heed.

"..."

With tears still in her eyes, Index looked up at Kamijou.

"...Then why were you in such a rush to get to your supplementary lessons?"

".....Oh."

Kamijou thought back. Sure enough, after he had stripped her nude by destroying her Walking Church with Imagine Breaker and that closed elevator-like silence had taken over, he had...

"Because you had plans and because you had a normal life to live, I felt it was wrong to disturb all that..."

"O-oh. Yeah..."

“I was in the way there.”

“...”

“I was in the way...”

Once she repeated herself with tears in her eyes, it was downright impossible to try to get out of it.

“I’m fwowwy!” Kamijou Touma apologized as he quickly entered prostration mode.

Index slowly sat up in the futon like a sick person, grabbed Kamijou’s ears, and bit down on the top of his head like it was a giant onigiri.

♦

About six hundred meters away on top of a multi-tenant building, Stiyl took his binoculars away from his eyes.

“I’ve looked into who this boy Index is with is. ...How is she?”

Without turning around, Stiyl replied to the girl who had spoken to him.

“She’s alive. But that must mean they have a magic user.”

The girl gave no response, but it seemed she was more relieved that no one had died than worried about a new enemy.

The girl was eighteen, but she was about a head shorter than Stiyl who was only fourteen.

But then, Stiyl was over two meters tall, so the girl was still tall when compared to the average Japanese height.

Her waist-long black hair was tied in a ponytail. At her waist was sheathed Japanese sword over two meters long. It was a type known as a “command sword” that was used in Shinto rain calling ceremonies.

However, it would be a bit difficult to call her a Japanese beauty.

She wore used jeans and a white shirt. For someone reason, the left leg of her jeans were completely cut off up to the base of her thigh, the extra cloth at the bottom of her T-shirt was tied off so her midriff was visible, she wore knee high boots, and her Japanese sword was hanging down in a leather holster like it was a pistol.

She looked something like a sheriff from a Western who had traded his pistol for a Japanese sword.

Just like Stiyl the perfume-smelling priest, her outfit was hardly normal.

“So who exactly is this guy, Kanzaki?”

“The thing about that is...I was not able to get much information on the boy. At the very least, it seems he is not a magician or supernaturally powered in some other way.”

“What, are you trying to say he’s just a normal high school student?” Stiyl lit the cigarette he pulled out just by staring at the tip. “Just stop. I may not look it, but I’m a magician that has fully analyzed the existing 24 runes and developed six new powerful runes. This world is not kind enough to let a powerless amateur drive back Innocentius’s flames of judgment.”

Even with Index’s assistance, he had put together a plan using that help almost immediately. Plus there was that strange right hand of his. If that was a normal person in Japan, than it truly was a country of mysteries.

“True.” Kanzaki Kaori narrowed her eyes. “The real issue is that someone with that much battle ability is categorized as nothing more than a hopeless student who is prone to getting into fights.”

Academy City had a hidden side where it was an institution that mass produced espers.

Even if the organization under which Stiyl and Kanzaki worked was hiding Index’s presence, Stiyl and Kanzaki had contacted the organization known as the Five Elements Institution beforehand to get permission to enter the city. Even the magic group that was known as the greatest in the world could not remain hidden within the enemy’s field.

“Perhaps the information is being intentionally blocked. Also, Index’s wounds were magically healed. Kanzaki, do any other magical organizations exist in the Far East?”

They had decided that the boy must have an organization other than the Five Elements Institution on his side.

They mistakenly believed that this other organization was thoroughly eliminating all information on Kamijou.

“If they’re doing something in this city, the Five Elements Institution’s informants must have picked up on them.” Kanzaki closed her eyes. “We have an unknown number of enemies and no chance of backup. This is a difficult development.”

It was all a misunderstanding. Kamijou’s Imagine Breaker had zero effect unless it was being used on supernatural powers. In other words, Academy City’s System Scan was unable to measure his power because it used machines to measure it. And so Kamijou had the misfortune to be treated like a Level 0 despite possessing a top class right hand.

“In the worst case scenario, this could develop into a magical battle against an organization. Stiyl, I heard your runes have a fatal flaw when it comes to waterproofing.”

“I’ve already compensated for that. I laminated the runes. The same trick won’t work on me again.” Like a stage magician, he pulled out the runes that now looked almost like trading cards. “This time, I will place the barrier two kilometers around the area rather than just on the building. It will take 164,000 cards and the preparations will take sixty hours to complete.”

Unlike in video games, real magic took a bit more than just chanting a spell.

It may have seemed that was all it took at first glance, but quite a bit of preparation was necessary behind the scenes. Stiyl’s flames were the type of thing that had instructions along the lines of “Take a silver wolf’s fang that has soaked up ten years of moonlight and...” For this reason, Stiyl’s speed was actually that of an expert.

In short, magical battles were a matter of reading what was to come. When the battle started, you were essentially caught in the trap that was the enemy’s barrier. When defending, you had to determine what the enemy’s spell was, and find a way to turn it back at the enemy. When attacking, you had to predict what kinds of counterattacks would come and rearrange your spell accordingly. Unlike simple martial arts, you had to think 100-200 steps ahead amidst constantly changing surroundings. While savage terms like “fighting” were used, it was actually more of an intellectual battle.

For that reason, an enemy force of unknown numbers put a magician at a serious disadvantage.

“...She looks so happy,” said the rune magician suddenly as he stared six hundred meters ahead without using his binoculars. “She looks so very, very happy. She always lives such a happy life.” His sounded like he was spitting out some kind of thick liquid. “How long do we have to keep ripping that to pieces?”

Kanzaki stared six hundred meters ahead from behind Stiyl.

Even without using binoculars or magic, she could see clearly with her 8.0 vision. Through the window, she could see the girl angrily biting down on the boy’s head while he flailed his arms around and struggled.

“It must be a complicated feeling,” said Kanzaki like a machine. “*For someone like you who was once in that same position*.”

“...I’m used to it,” replied the flame magician.

He truly had experienced that feeling many times before.

Part 3

“Bathtime♪ Bathtime♪” sang Index as she walked next to Kamijou, holding a wash basin in both hands.

As if to say she was done being sick, she had changed from the pajamas and into her safety-pin-covered nun’s habit.

Kamijou had no idea what kind of magic trick she used, but the bloody habit was perfectly clean. He had a feeling it would have been torn to pieces if she had thrown it in the washing machine, so he wondered if she had taken it apart and washed each individual piece.

“Does it bother you that much? To be honest, I don’t care about the smell.”

“Are you the type that likes the smell of sweat?”

“I didn’t mean it like that!!”

After three days, she was finally well enough to head out and a bath had been her first request.

Komoe-sensei’s apartment did not have anything even remotely resembling a bath, so their only options were to borrow the one in the manager’s room or head to the nearby run down public bath.

And so the young boy and girl were walking along a footpath at night with wash basin in hand.

“Just what era of Japanese culture are we living in?” Komoe-sensei had commented with a smile as she explained the public bath system. She was letting Kamijou and Index stay in her apartment without asking for details on their situation. Kamijou was going along with freeloading with her because he did not want to return to his dorm that was undoubtedly being watched by the enemy.

“Touma, Touma,” said Index in a muffled voice because she was lightly biting the upper arm of his shirt.

Because of her habit of biting people, that was nothing more than a gesture similar to grabbing at someone’s clothes to draw their attention.

“...What?” replied Kamijou in exasperation.

That morning, Index had realized she didn’t know his name, so he had introduced himself to her. In the time since then, she had to have called his name about sixty thousand times.

“Nothing. I just like calling your name even without a reason.”

Index’s expression was like that of a child going to an amusement park for the first time.

Index seemed very attached to him.

It was likely due to what had happened three days prior, but Kamijou was less happy than he was unsure how to feel about the fact that no one had ever said something that basic to Index.

“Komoe said the Japanese public bath has coffee milk. What’s coffee milk? Is it like a cappuccino?”

“You’re not gonna find anything that elegant in a public bath. Don’t get your hopes up so much,” said Kamijou. “Hmm, but the giant bath might be a bit shocking to you. In England, the cramped baths like those at a hotel are most common, right?”

“Hm? ...I don’t really know.” Index tilted her head to the side as if she really did not know. “The first thing I remember is begin here in Japan. I don’t really know how things are back in England.”

“...Hmm. So that’s why you speak Japanese so fluently. If you were here since you were little, then you’re practically Japanese yourself.”

That gave her certainty that she would be safe if she escaped to the Anglican Church a little less credibility, though. He had thought she would be heading home, but she would actually be heading to another country she had never seen before.

“No, no. That isn’t what I meant.” Index shook her head, shaking her long silver hair back and forth. “Apparently, I was born and raised in London’s St. George’s Cathedral. Apparently, I only came here about a year ago.”

“Apparently?”

Kamijou frowned at that vague term.

“Yeah. I have no memories from before about a year ago when I arrived here.”

Index smiled.

Just like a child heading to an amusement park for the first time in her life.

It was the perfection of that smile that showed Kamijou the fear and pain behind it.

“When I first woke up in a back alley, I had no idea who I was. All I knew was that I had to run away. I couldn’t remember what I ate for dinner the night before, but knowledge

of things like magic, the Index Librorum Prohibitorum, and Necessarius were swirling around in my mind. It was so scary..."

"Then you don't even know why you lost your memories?"

"That's right," she replied.

Kamijou knew nothing of psychology, but he knew from video games and dramas that there were two major causes of amnesia: receiving a major shock to the head or sealing a memory that your heart simply could not bear.

"God dammit..." muttered Kamijou as he looked up into the night sky.

While he did feel anger towards the magicians who would do that to a girl like her, he was mostly overcome by a sense of powerlessness.

He now knew why Index had covered for him and grown so oddly attached to him. It was simply that *Kamijou just so happened to be* the first person she gotten to know after spending a year alone in the world without knowing anything.

This did not please Kamijou.

He had no idea why, but for some reason *that* answer really pissed him off.

"Mh? Touma, are you angry?"

"No, I'm not."

The question had caught him off guard, but Kamijou managed to feign ignorance.

"If I upset you in some way, I apologize. Touma, what has you so mad? Is it puberty?"

"I don't want to hear you talking about puberty with that childlike body of yours."

"Mh. What was that? I really do think you're mad. Or are you only pretending to be mad to trouble me? I don't like that side of you, Touma."

"Hey, don't say that when you never really liked me in the first place. I'm not expecting that kind of wonderful love comedy-like turn of events with you."

"..."

"Huh? ...Why are you staring up at me like that, princess?"

"..."

Even when he tried to force it in the direction of a gag, Index gave no response.

(Odd. This is weird. Why is Index folding her arms, looking up at me with tears in her eyes and a hurt-looking expression on her face, and lightly biting her lower lip?)

“Touma.”

“Yes?” Kamijou responded, deciding he might as well respond since she called his name.

He had a strong foreboding of misfortune.

“I hate you.”

In that instant, Kamijou gained a good amount of experience points for the rare experience of a girl biting down on the entirety of the top of his head.

Part 4

Index headed on to the public bath alone.

Meanwhile, Kamijou trudged on toward the public bath. He had tried running after Index at first, but the angry white nun would run off like a stray cat whenever she saw him. Despite this, he would see Index’s back after walking a bit further as if she was waiting for him. After that, the cycle would repeat. She was truly like a capricious cat.

(Well, we’re headed to the same place, so we’ll meet up again eventually.)

With that thought, Kamijou gave up trying to run after her.

Not to mention that he sensed impending misfortune in the form of being arrested if someone saw him (seemingly) chasing a weak and helpless young British nun down a dark pathway at night like he was a Namahage.

“A British nun, hm?” Kamijou muttered under his breath as he walked down the dark pathway alone.

He knew that Index would be brought to the Anglican Church’s headquarters in London if he brought her to one of their churches in Japan. There would be nothing left for Kamijou to do. It would all surely end with something like, “It may have just been a short time, but thank you. I will never forget you because I have a perfect memory.”

Kamijou felt something sharply stabbing inside his chest, but he had no other ideas of what to do. If Index was not brought under the Church’s protection, she would continue to be chased by those magicians. Also, it was unrealistic to try to follow Index to England.

They lived in different worlds, they stood different places, and they existed in different dimensions.

Kamijou lived in the world of scientific esper powers and she lived in the world of the magical occult.

Like land and sea, their two worlds would never cross paths.

That was all there was to it.

That was all there was to it, but it still annoyed him like a fish bone stuck in his throat.

"Huh?"

Suddenly his vainly spinning thoughts cut off.

Something was not right. Kamijou checked the time displayed on a department store's electronic billboard. It was exactly 8 PM. It would still be some time before most people were asleep, and yet a horrible silence had fallen over the area like in a forest at night. A strange out-of-place feeling hung over the area.

(Come to think of it, I haven't seen anyone since I was walking with Index...)

With a puzzled look, Kamijou walked further along.

And when he came to a major road with three lanes in each direction, that out-of-place feeling shifted to a full-blown sense of things being just plain wrong.

There was no one there.

No one was entering or exiting the major department stores that lined the road like drinks on a convenience store rack. The footpath that usually felt overly narrow now felt horribly wide and not a single car was driving along that runway like road. All the cars parked on the side of road were empty as if they had been abandoned.

It was like looking at a farm road way out in the country.

"This is because Stiyl carved the Opila rune for a people clearing field."

A female voice suddenly entered his head like it was a Japanese sword stabbing through the middle of his face.

He had not noticed at all.

The girl had not been hiding behind anything and she had not snuck up behind him either. She was standing in the center of the wide runway-like road about ten meters ahead of him, cutting off his path.

It went beyond the level of not seeing or noticing her due to the darkness. An instant before, there had truly been no one there. However, in the time it took him to blink, the girl had appeared there.

“All the people around this area have had their focus averted so they do not think of approaching here for some reason. Most of the people are likely inside the buildings, so do not worry.”

His body reacted before his mind could. All the blood in his body seemed to gather in his right hand. With a pain like a rope was tightly binding his wrist, Kamijou instinctually sensed that the girl was dangerous.

The girl wore a T-shirt and jeans with one leg boldly cut off, so her clothes were not completely removed from what was normal.

However, the over two meter long Japanese sword hanging from her waist like a pistol gave off a freezing killer intent. The blade was hidden within the scabbard, but the black scabbard appeared as full of history as the pillar of an old Japanese building, so it seemed clear that the sword was real.

“The One who Purifies God and Slays Demons.[15] An excellent true name.”

However, the girl herself showed no sign of nervousness. The way she spoke with the comfort of someone having a casual chat made it all the more frightening.

“...Who are you?”

“I am Kanzaki Kaori. ...I would prefer not to give my other name if possible.”

“Your other name?”

“My magic name.”

He had expected that to a certain extent, but Kamijou still took a step back.

A magic name. That was the “killing name” Stiyl had given before attacking Kamijou with magic.

“So...what? Are you from that magic cabal or whatever just like Stiyl?”

“...?” For a split second, Kanzaki frowned in doubt. “Oh, did you hear that from Index?”

Kamijou gave no reply.

[15] “The One who Purifies God and Slays Demons” (神浄の討魔) is pronounced “Kamijou no Touma” but uses different kanji than Touma’s name (上条当麻).

A magic cabal. The organization chasing Index to acquire her 103,000 grimoires. A group striving to become Magic Gods, people who had so thoroughly mastered magic that they could twist everything in the world to their will.

“To be honest.” Kanzaki closed one eye. “I would like to take her into our care without having to give my magic name.”

Kamijou shuddered.

Kamijou had the trump card of his right hand and yet the enemy standing before him sent a chill down his back.

“...And if I refuse?” said Kamijou nevertheless. He had no reason to fall back.

“Then I will have no choice.” Kanzaki closed her other eye. “I will have to give my name until she has been taken into our care.”

An earthquake-like shock caused the ground under Kamijou’s feet to tremble.

It was like a bomb had gone off. The night sky at the edge of his vision that should have been covered in the pale blue darkness was instead colored with a burning orange like the sunset. Giant flames were spreading a few hundred meters ahead.

“Index...!!”

The enemy was an organization and Kamijou knew the name of a flame magician.

Kamijou reflexively looked over in the direction of the exploding flames.

And in that instant, Kanzaki Kaori’s slicing attack came at him.

A distance of ten meters lay between Kamijou and Kanzaki. Also, Kanzaki’s katana was over two meters long, so it looked impossible for her slender feminine arms to pull it from its scabbard, much less swing it around.

...But that was just how it looked.

In the next instant, the air above Kamijou’s head was sliced apart like she was wielding a giant laser. Kamijou froze in place in shock and the blade of a wind turbine behind him and to the right was silently sliced through diagonally as if it was made of butter.

“Please stop this,” said a voice ten meters in front of him. “Ignoring my warnings will only lead to death.”

Kanzaki’s two meter+ sword was already in the scabbard. The strike had been so quick Kamijou had never even seen the blade exposed to the air.

Kamijou had been unable to move.

The only reason he was still standing there was because Kanzaki had intentionally missed. The situation seemed so unreal that he only just barely managed to realize that fact. His enemy was so absurdly powerful that his mind could not keep up.

With a loud thud, the sliced wind turbine blade fell to the ground behind Kamijou.

Even though the wreckage of that blade fell so close by, Kamijou was still unable to move.

"...!"

Kamijou gritted his teeth at how ridiculously sharp that blade had to be.

Kanzaki opened one of her closed eyes and said, "I will ask you again." She narrowed her eyes slightly. "I would like to take her into our care without having to give my magic name."

No hesitation was present in Kanzaki's voice.

Her voice was so cold she seemed to be saying that that level of destruction was nothing worth being surprised over.

"...Wh-what the hell are you saying?"

As if his feet were glued to the ground, he could not move forward or step backwards.

His legs trembled like he had just finished running a full marathon and he could feel his strength leaving them.

"I have no reason to surrender to-..."

"I will ask as many times as it takes."

In an instant – truly only an instant – Kanzaki's right hand blurred and disappeared like a bug in a video game.

With a roar, something flew towards Kamijou with frightening speed.

"!?"

Kamijou felt like giant laser guns were being fired from all directions.

It was like a giant tornado made up of blades of air.

Kamijou Touma watched as that typhoon sliced the asphalt, the streetlights, and the trees lining the street at set intervals to pieces as if with an industrial water jet cutter. A fist-sized piece of asphalt flew through the air and struck Kamijou's right shoulder. That was enough to send him flying and almost knock him unconscious.

Holding his right shoulder, Kamijou looked around while moving only his eyes.

One...two...three, four, five, six, seven. A total of seven straight sword cuts continued for a few dozen meters across the flat ground. The sword cuts came in at many seemingly random angles and looked something like fingernail scratches on a steel door.

He heard the click of her katana returning to its scabbard.

"I would like to take her into our care without having to give my magic name."

With her right hand still on the hilt of her sword, Kanzaki merely spoke the words with no hatred or anger.

Seven strikes. Kamijou had been unable to see even one strike, but she had performed seven iai strikes in that single instant. And if she had wanted to, any or all of those seven strikes could have been a deadly attack that sliced Kamijou in two.

No. He had only heard the metallic sound of the sword being sheathed once.

It was most likely the *supernatural power* known as magic. She had some magic that extended the range of that one strike by dozens of meters and gave her the swordsmanship to attack seven times while drawing only once.

"The speed of the Nanasen[16] attack that my Shichiten Shichitou[17] puts together is enough to kill you seven times over in the period of time known as an instant. People refer to this as an instant kill. Calling this a certain kill would not be far from the truth."

Silently, Kamijou clenched his fist with enough force to crush his right hand.

She had overwhelming speed, power, and range. Most likely, that slicing attack had something to do with the supernatural power known as magic. In that case, he just had to touch the actual attack itself.

"Keep dreaming," she said, cutting off his thoughts. "I heard from Stiyl that your right hand can dispel magic for some reason. However, am I correct in thinking you cannot do so unless you touch it with that right hand of yours?"

Exactly. Kamijou's right hand was of no use if he could not touch it.

[16] Nanasen means "Seven Flashes".
[17] Shichiten Shichitou means "Seven Heavens Seven Swords".

It was not just an issue of speed. Unlike Misaka Mikoto's Biri Biri-ing and Railgun that shot in a straight line, he could not predict where Kanzaki Kaori's Nanasen would go due to its constant changing. If Kamijou tried to use Imagine Breaker, those seven slices would likely slice his arm to pieces right off the bat.

"I will ask as many times as it takes."

Kanzaki's right hand silently grabbed the hilt of Shichiten Shichitou at her waist.

Kamijou felt a cold sweat on his cheek.

If Kanzaki's mood changed and she went in for the kill, Kamijou would certainly be sliced to pieces in an instant. Given how she had sliced the trees lining the road to pieces at a range of a few dozen meters, trying to run away or use something as a shield would be suicide.

Kamijou calculated the distance between himself and Kanzaki.

It was about ten meters. If he ran as quickly as his physical body would let him, he could cover that distance in four steps.

(...Move.)

Kamijou gave a desperate command to his legs that seemed glued to the ground with instant glue.

"Will you let us take her into our care before I give my magic name?"

(...Move!!)

He took one step forward as if ripping his feet off of the ground. One of Kanzaki's eyebrows twitched up as Kamijou moved to take another explosive step forward like a bullet.

"Ohh....Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

He took his next step. If he could not run away, could not evade to the right or left, and could not use anything as a shield, the only option left was to head forward and open up a path for himself.

"I do not know what is driving you on this much, but..."

Kanzaki gave a sigh that held more pity than surprise. And then...

Nanasen.

The small fragments of the destroyed asphalt and trees floated in the air like dust.

With a roar of wind, that cloud of dust was sliced to pieces before Kamijou's eyes.

"Ah.....Ohh!!"

He knew in his head that he could negate it if he touched it with his right hand, but his heart immediately chose to evade. He crouched down with such force it looked like he was swinging his head down and his heart froze as the seven slicing attacks passed overhead.

He had not calculated that and there was no way he could have pulled it off had he done so. He had only managed to evade due to pure luck.

And he then took another powerful step, the third of the four.

No matter how strange an attack Nanasen was, it was still an iai strike at its base. It was an ancient sword technique that let fly a single definitive attack that began with the action of sliding the sword from its scabbard. This meant that the time when the blade was out of its scabbard left the user defenseless and unable to use another iai strike.

If he took that last step to reach Kanzaki, he would win.

The final hope that thought gave Kamijou was shattered to pieces with a small click.

It was the much-too-short slight metallic noise of the katana being returned to its scabbard.

Nanasen.

The roar came from directly in front of Kamijou at pointblank range.

The seven strikes were on him before his body's reflexes could even kick in.

"Dammit...Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Kamijou stuck his right fist forward toward the slicing attacks in front of him, but it was more like a defensive attempt to catch a ball thrown at his face than an offensive attack.

As long as it was a supernatural power, Kamijou's right hand could negate it even if it was the power of god or the power of vampires.

Due to being at such close range, the seven strikes came all as one without spreading out. That meant he could blow away all seven of them with one strike of Imagine Breaker.

As the strikes glowed blue in the moonlight, the skin of one finger on Kamijou's fist lightly touched them.

And was eaten into.

“Wha...!?”

It did not disappear. Even with Imagine Breaker, those absurd strikes did not disappear.

Kamijou immediately tried to yank his hand back, but he did not make it in time. After all, he had stuck his own hand into the oncoming strike of a Japanese sword.

Kanzaki narrowed her eyes slightly at the sight of Kamijou.

In the next instant, the wet sound of flesh being sliced apart filled the area.

Kamijou held his bloody right hand with his left and fell to his knees.

He was honestly surprised to find all five of his fingers were still attached.

This was of course not due to Kamijou’s fingers being tough or Kanzaki’s skill being poor. Kamijou’s body had not been sliced to pieces due to the simple fact that she had held back, held back some more, and allowed him to live.

Still on his knees, Kamijou looked up.

Kanzaki stood with the perfect circle of the blue moon behind her. He could see something like red threads in front of her.

It looked like a spider web. It was only once Kamijou’s blood covered them like evening dew on a spider web that he could see the seven steel wires.

“I can’t believe this...” Kamijou clenched his teeth. “Are you not even a magician?”

The ridiculously huge katana was nothing but a decoration.

It was not surprising that he had been unable to see the instant she drew the sword. Kanzaki had never actually drawn it. She had only moved the sword slightly within the scabbard and then moved it back. That motion had been to hide the hand manipulating the seven wires.

Kamijou’s hand was relatively unharmed because Kanzaki had loosened the wires just before they severed his fingers.

“As I said, I heard about your ability from Stiyl.” Kanzaki sounded disinterested. “That is when I realized it. Your power is not of greater quantity, it is of a different type. It is the same as rock-paper-scissors. No matter how many times you use rock, you can never defeat my paper.”

“...”

Kamijou clenched his bloody fist.

“You seem mistaken about something.” It seemed to pain Kanzaki to look at him. “I am not disguising a lack of ability with a cheap trick. Shichiten Shichitou is not a mere decoration. Beyond Nanasen is the true Yuisen[18].”

“...”

He clenched his bloody fist.

“And more importantly, I have not given my magic name yet.”

“...”

He clenched it.

“Please do not make me give it, boy.” Kanzaki bit her lip. “I do not want to give it ever again.”

His clenched fist trembled. She was clearly different from Stiyl. She was not just a one-trick pony. From the most basic of the basics to the most foundational of the foundations, she was made completely differently from Kamijou.

“...Like I can give up.”

Even so, Kamijou did not unclench his fist. He kept his right hand closed despite having no feeling in it.

Index had not given up in her attempt to face Kamijou when sliced in the back by that magician.

“What did you say? ...I could not hear you.”

“I said shut the hell up, you damn robot!!”

Kamijou clenched his bloody fist and tried to swing it at the face of the girl standing before him.

But the toe of Kanzaki’s boot jabbed into his solar plexus before he could. All the air in his lungs burst from his mouth and the Shichiten Shichitou’s black scabbard struck him on the side of the face like a baseball bat. His body spun like a tornado and he struck the ground shoulder-first.

Before he could cry out in pain, Kamijou saw the bottom of a boot coming down to crush his head.

In an attempt to evade, he immediately rolled to the side.

[18] Yuisen means "Single Flash".

And...

“Nanasen.”

As that term entered Kamijou’s ears, seven slicing attacks broke the asphalt around him to pieces. Kamijou’s entire body was pelted by an explosion of small fragments from every direction.

“Gh...Ah...!?”

Kamijou writhed in place as he was assaulted by intense pain similar to being ganged up on and beaten by five or six people. Kanzaki approached him with her boots scraping on the ground.

(I need to get up...)

However, his legs were too tired to move.

“Surely that is enough.” Her quiet voice actually sounded pained. “There is no reason for you to go this far for her. Lasting even thirty seconds against one of the top ten magicians in London is quite an achievement. She cannot blame you after you went this far.”

“...”

Kamijou’s mind was hazy, but he managed to recall something.

He recalled that Index would indeed not blame him no matter what he did.

(But...)

It was precisely because she continued to withstand it all without blaming anyone else that he could not give up.

He wanted to save that girl who smiled so perfectly with that otherwise heartbreaking expression.

He forced his destroyed right hand into a fist like it was a dying bug.

His body could still move.

It moved when he asked it to.

“...Why?” Kamijou whispered from his position collapsed on the ground. “You look like you don’t like this. You aren’t like that Stiyl guy. You’re hesitating to kill your enemy. You could easily have killed me from the beginning if you wanted to, but *you didn’t*.

...You still have enough of a normal human's way of thinking to *hesitate* about things like that, don't you?"

Kanzaki had asked again and again.

She had asked to have it all ended before she had to give her magic name.

The runic magician naming himself Stiyl Magnus had not shown the slightest bit of hesitation there.

"..."

Kanzaki Kaori fell silent, but Kamijou's mind was too hazy from all the pain to notice.

"Then surely you know, right? You know that chasing a girl around until she collapses from hunger and then slicing her back open with a sword is wrong, right?" As he spoke the words as if he was coughing up blood, Kanzaki could only continue to listen. "Did you know that she has no memories beyond about a year ago thanks to you? What the hell did you do to her while chasing her down to cause something like that?"

He received no response.

Kamijou could not understand.

He would have understood if this magician had been trying to gain the 103,000 grimoires to become a Magic God that could (supposedly) bend the rules of the world in order to make some wish come true such as healing a child with an incurable disease or something for a dead lover.

But that was not what she was doing.

She was part of an organization. She was doing this because she had been told to, because it was her job, and because those were her orders. That was all it had taken for her to chase down a girl and slice her back open.

"Why?" Kamijou repeated, his teeth clenched. "I'm a loser who couldn't save a single girl after risking my life to put up a desperate fight against you. I'm a weakling who can do nothing but lie on the ground and watch you take her away." He sounded like he could burst into tears like a child at any moment. "But you're different, aren't you?" He had no idea what he was saying. "With your power, you can protect anyone or anything and save anything or anyone." He had no idea who he was speaking to. "So why are you doing this?"

He spoke.

And he regretted.

He regretted that he had thought he could protect everything he wanted to with the little power he had.

He regretted that someone with such overwhelming power was using it only to hunt down a small girl.

He regretted that the situation seemed to be saying he was worse than even someone like that.

He regretted it all and he thought he was going to cry.

"..."

Silence built atop silence, creating an even greater silence.

If Kamijou's mind had been clear, he would definitely have been surprised.

"...I..."

Kanzaki was the one driven into a corner.

With only a few words, he had driven one of the top ten magicians in London into a corner.

"I really did not mean to slice her back open. I thought the barrier of her Walking Church nun's habit was still functioning... I only sliced her because I was absolutely sure it would not hurt her...And yet..."

Kamijou did not understand what Kanzaki was saying.

"I am not doing this because I want to," said Kanzaki. "But she cannot live if I do not do this. ...She will...die."

Kanzaki sounded like a child about to burst into tears.

"The organization I belong to is the same as hers. I am from Necessarius of the Anglican Church," she said as if coughing up blood. "She is my colleague...and my precious friend."

CHAPTER 3

The Grimoire Peacefully Smiles.

"Forget_me_not."

Part 1

He did not understand. He did not understand what she was saying.

While Kamijou lay collapsed and bloody on the road and looked up at Kanzaki, he thought he had hallucinated what he heard due to the shock. After all, it made no sense. Index was trying to escape to the Anglican Church while being chased by magicians. How could those magicians be from that very same Anglican Church?

“Have you ever heard of a perfect memory?” asked Kanzaki Kaori. Her voice was weak and she looked pained. At that moment, it was hard to believe she was one of the top ten magicians in London. She looked like nothing more than an exhausted girl.

“Yes, that’s the true identity of her 103,000 grimoires, right?” Kamijou moved his split lips. “They’re all in her head. I find it hard to believe she can remember every single thing she sees even once, though. I mean, she’s an idiot. She just doesn’t look like that kind of genius.”

“...What does she look like to you?”

“Just a girl.”

Kanzaki looked more exhausted than surprised, and she said, “Do you think she could have escaped our pursuit for an entire year if she was ‘just a girl’?”

“...”

“Stiyl has his flames and I have my Nanasen and Yuisen. She is up against magicians who name their magic names, but she cannot rely on a supernatural power like you or magic like me. She can only run away.” Kanzaki gave a self-derisive smile. “And Stiyl and I are only two opponents. Not even I would last a month against the entire organization of Necessarius.”

That was right.

Kamijou finally learned the truth about Index. He had not been able to escape for even four days with his Imagine Breaker that could smash even the systems of god in a single strike. And yet, she...

"She is, without a doubt, a genius," declared Kanzaki. "To the extent that using her ability in the wrong way could cause a disaster.[19] The reason why the higher ups in the Church do not treat her normally is clear. They are afraid of her. Everyone is."

"That may be." Kamijou bit his bloody lip. "But she's still human. She's not a tool. I can't...let you call her that...!"

"Yes." Kanzaki nodded. "But her current specs are not that different from normal people like us."

"...?"

"Over 85% of Index's brain is filled with the 103,000 grimoires. The remaining fifteen percent is just barely managing to function enough for her to be the same as us."

That was amazing and all, but there was something Kamijou wanted to know first.

"...So what? What are you people doing? You're part of the same Church as Index, right? That Necessarius thing. Why are you chasing her around? Why was Index saying you were evil magicians from a magic cabal?" Kamijou silently clenched his back teeth. "Or are you trying to say Index was the one tricking me?"

He could not believe that. If she was simply trying to use Kamijou, he did not see why she would have risked her life and gotten her back sliced open to save him.

And even without that logical reasoning, Kamijou simply did not want to believe it.

"...She was not lying," replied Kanzaki Kaori after a slight hesitation.

She sounded like she was holding her breath and like her heart was being crushed.

"She does not remember anything. She does not remember that we too are from Necessarius or the reason that she is being chased. Because she does not remember, she has to use her knowledge to fill in the gaps. It is only natural to assume magicians chasing the Index Librorum Prohibitorum are from a magic cabal that is after her 103,000 grimoires."

[19] Just like in the prologue, this is playing off the fact that "genius" and "disaster" are both pronounced the same in Japanese.

Kamijou recalled something.

Index had lost her memories from before about a year ago.

“But wait. Wait a second. That doesn’t make sense. Index has a perfect memory, right? So why did she forget? What made her lose her memories?”

“She did not lose them.” Kanzaki stopped even breathing. “Technically, I erased them.”

Kamijou did not even need to ask how.

"*–Please do not make me give it, boy*."

"*–I do not want to give it ever again.*"

“...Why? He asked instead. “Why!? I thought you were Index’s comrade! And that wasn’t just something Index thought. I can tell from your face! You saw Index as a precious comrade, didn’t you!? So why!?”

Kamijou recalled the smile Index had given him.

It was been the reverse side of the loneliness that had led to him being the only person in the world she knew.

“...We had to do it.”

“Why!?” he shouted as if he was howling at the moon above his head.

“Because Index would have died otherwise.”

His breathing stopped. For no discernible reason, the heat of the midsummer night he felt on his skin departed. All five of his senses grew thin like they were trying to escape reality.

It felt like...It felt like he had become a corpse.

“Like I said, 85% of her brain is taken up by the memories of the 103,000 grimoires.” Kanzaki’s shoulders trembled slightly. “She only has the remaining fifteen percent to use like normal. If she continues to amass memories like a normal person, her brain will quickly burst.”

“No way...”

Denial. Rather than using logic or reasoning, Kamijou’s brain merely denied it.

“I mean...I mean...how can that be? You said she was the same as us with that fifteen percent...”

“Yes, but she is different than us in one way. She has a perfect memory.” All feeling slowly left Kanzaki’s voice. “Think back to what a perfect memory really is.”

“...It’s the ability to never forget anything you see even once, right?”

“And is the ability to forget really all that bad a thing?”

“...”

“The specs of the human brain are surprisingly small. The only reason a human brain can keep functioning for a hundred years is because unneeded memories are disposed of using the process of forgetting. For example, you do not remember what you ate for dinner a week ago, do you? Everyone’s brain undergoes this maintenance without them even realizing it. Otherwise, people would be unable to live. But,” Kanzaki said with an icy voice, “she cannot do this.”

“...”

“She cannot forget anything, be it the number of leaves on the trees lining the road, the faces of each and every person during rush hour, or the shape of each and every raindrop falling from the sky. All of those pointless garbage memories fill up her head in no time.” Kanzaki’s voice froze over. “Only having fifteen percent of her brain leftover is a fatal blow for her. Since she cannot forget on her own, her only way to live on is to get someone else to make her forget.”

Kamijou’s mind fell to pieces.

(What...what kind of story is this? I thought this was the story of an uninteresting guy saving an unfortunate girl who is being chased by evil magicians, getting to know the girl, and finally feeling a slight twinge in his chest as he watches the girl leave in the end.)

"–*So I came to shelter her before* anyone who would use them *comes to take her away*."

"–*I would like to take her into our care without having to give my magic name.*"

“...How long?” Kamijou asked.

Because he asked that question rather than continue denying it, he must have accepted it somewhere deep down.

“How long until her brain bursts?”

“Her memories are erased at precise one year intervals.” Kanzaki sounded exhausted. “The limit is three days from now. It cannot be done too soon or too late. *If it is not done at that exact time, her memories cannot be erased.* ...I hope she has yet to experience the powerful headaches that precede it.”

Kamijou was shocked. It was true Index had said she had lost her memories from over about a year ago.

And the headaches. Kamijou had assumed Index had collapsed due to the recovery magic. After all, Index knew the most about magic of any of them and she had said as much.

But what if Index was mistaken?

What if she was moving around in a state where her mind could be destroyed at any moment?

“Do you understand now?” asked Kanzaki Kaori. There were no tears as if she refused to allow herself to display such cheap expressions. “We do not wish to harm her. In fact, there is no way to save her without us. So will you hand her over before I must give my magic name?”

“...”

Index’s face appeared in Kamijou’s mind’s eye, so he gritted his teeth and clenched his eyes shut.

“Also, if we erase her memories she will not remember you. You saw how she viewed us, did you not? No matter how she feels about you now, once she opens her eyes, she will see you as nothing more than her natural enemy who is after her 103,000 grimoires.”

“...”

At that point, Kamijou had a slight feeling of something being not quite right.

“Saving her will gain you nothing.”

“...What do you mean by that?” That feeling exploded out in an instant like gasoline being thrown on a fire. “To hell with that! What does her remembering me have to do with it!? You don’t seem to get it, so let me tell you something. I’m Index’s comrade. I decided to stay on her side no matter what happens! Even if it isn’t written in your precious Bible, that will never change!!”

“...”

“I thought something was off. If she only forgot, can’t you just get rid of the misunderstandings by explaining it all to her? Why did you just leave her misunderstandings intact? Why did you chase her around like her enemy!? Why the hell did you just decide to abandon her!? Do you have any idea how she fee-...”

“Shut up! You know nothing!!”

Kamijou’s anger was crushed by Kanzaki’s yell assaulting him from above. It was less the words she spoke that seemed to squeeze at Kamijou’s heart and more the raw feelings that had been stripped bare.

“Don’t act like you understand!! How do you think we felt erasing her feelings all this time!? How could you possibly understand!? You spoke like Stiyl was some kind of sadistic murderer, but do you know how he felt seeing her with you!? Do you know how he has suffered!? Do you know hard it was for him to name himself her enemy!? What do you understand about Stiyl’s feelings as he continued to sully himself for the sake of his precious comrade!?”

“Wha-...?”

Before Kamijou could raise his voice in shock at that sudden change in her behavior, Kanzaki kicked him in the side like he was a soccer ball. That unrestrained strike sent Kamijou’s body into the air. After landing, he rolled two or three meters away.

The taste of blood overflowed from his stomach up into his mouth.

However, Kanzaki jumped straight up so the moon was at her back before Kamijou could even writhe about in intense pain.

Like some kind of joke, she jumped three meters straight up in the air with just the strength of her legs.

“...!?”

He heard a dull noise.

The flat end of Shichiten Shichitou’s scabbard had crushed Kamijou’s arm like the heel of high heels.

But he could not even cry out in pain.

The expression on Kanzaki’s face made it look like she was about to shed tears of blood.

Kamijou was afraid.

He was not afraid of Nanasen or Yuisen or of the power of one the top ten magicians in London.

He was afraid of the raw human emotion that was pelting him.

“We tried, too! We tried everything we could! We spent spring trying, we spent summer trying, we spent fall trying, and we spent winter trying! We promised to make memories so she would never forget and we made journals and photo albums!”

The end of the scabbard rained down again and again like a sewing machine.

His legs, his arms, his gut, his chest, his face. The blunt blows crushed his body again and again.

“...But none of it worked.”

Kamijou heard the sound of her gritting her teeth.

Her hand stopped.

“Even when we showed her the journals and the photo albums, she merely apologized. No matter what we did and no matter how many times we tried, even if we remade the memories from scratch, nothing worked. Everything was returned to zero even if you were her family, her friend, or her lover.” She trembled to the extent that it looked like she could not take another step. “We...could not stand it anymore. We could not bear to see that smile of hers any longer.”

With Index’s personality, having to say farewell must have been as painful as dying.

Having to experience that over and over again would be like living in hell.

Immediately after experiencing the misfortune that was the farewell, she would forget it all and tragically start running toward that same determined misfortune once more.

That was why Kanzaki and Stiyl had chosen to lessen the misfortune as much as possible rather than give her the cruel fortune of getting to know them. If Index never had the precious memories she had to lose, then the shock of losing her memories would lessen. That was why they abandoned their good friend and played the part of her enemy.

They would blot out her memories to make that final hell as easy as possible for her.

“...”

Somehow or other, Kamijou understood.

They were expert magicians. They made the impossible possible. The entire time Index was losing her memories time and time again, they had to have been searching for a way to keep her from having to lose her memories.

But they had never managed it.

And Index had certainly not blamed Stiyl or Kanzaki.

She had surely given that same smile as always.

Being forced to connect with her anew each time had led Kanzaki and Stiyl to blame themselves and see giving up as the only option.

But that was...

"To hell with that!" Kamijou gritted his teeth. "That reasoning only takes yourselves into account. You didn't give even a single thought about Index! Don't put the blame for your own cowardice on her!!"

For the past year, Index had continued to flee on her own without relying on anyone.

Kamijou could not accept that that was the best option. He would not let himself accept it. He did not want to accept it.

"Then...what else are we supposed to do!?"

Kanzaki grabbed Shichiten Shichitou's scabbard and swung it forcefully down toward Kamijou's face.

Kamijou moved his battered right hand and grabbed the scabbard just before it struck his face.

He no longer felt any fear or nervousness regarding that magician.

His body moved.

It moved!

"If you were a little stronger..." Kamijou gritted his teeth. "If you had only used fox words powerful enough to become a reality! If she was afraid of losing her memories of that year, you just had to give her even better memories during the next year! If happiness great enough to erase her fear of losing her memories awaited her, she wouldn't have to keep running! That's all it would have taken!!"

He forcibly moved his left arm which now had its shoulder broken and grabbed the scabbard with that hand too. He forced his battered body into standing position. Blood flowed from various parts of his body.

“Are you seriously thinking of fighting in that state?”

“...Shut...up.”

“What will you gain by fighting?” Kanzaki seemed legitimately confused. “Even if you did defeat me, Necessarius awaits behind me. I may have said I was one of the top ten magicians in London, but there are those stronger than me. ...From the Church’s view, I am nothing more than a subordinate to be sent out to this Far East island nation.”

That was likely true.

If they really were Index’s comrades, they would have opposed the church’s way of treating her like a tool. The fact that they did not meant there was enough of a gap in power to prevent it.

“I said...shut up!!”

But that did not matter.

He forced his body to move despite it trembling like he was about to die and glared at Kanzaki who stood directly before him.

It was a simple gaze that held no real power, but it was enough to make one of the top ten magicians in London take a step back.

“That doesn’t matter! Do you simply resign yourself to protecting people because you have strength!?” Kamijou took a step forward with his battered legs. “No, you don’t, do you!? Don’t lie! You worked to gain power because there was something you wanted to protect!”

He grabbed Kanzaki’s collar with his battered left hand.

“Why did you acquire power?”

He made a bloody fist with his battered right hand.

“Who did you want to protect!?”

He used that weak fist to strike Kanzaki’s face. There was nothing even remotely resembling force behind the punch and the fist Kamijou used to punch actually spurted blood out like a tomato.

Even so, Kanzaki stumbled back like she had been truly punched.

She let go of Shichiten Shichitou. It spun as it fell to the ground.

“Then what the hell are you doing here!?” He looked down on Kanzaki who had collapsed to the ground. “If you have so much strength...if you have so much almighty power, then why are you so powerless?”

The ground shook.

Or so it seemed to Kamijou. In the next instant, he collapsed to the ground like the electricity powering his body had been switched off.

(Get...up...The counterattack...is coming...)

His vision was dyed in darkness.

Kamijou forcibly moved his body that had lost too much blood to see or recover. He moved in an attempt to defend against Kanzaki’s counterattack. And yet the best he could manage was moving one fingertip like a caterpillar.

However, no counterattack came.

None came.

Part 2

Kamijou’s dry throat and feverish heat woke him.

“Touma?”

Around the time he realized he was in Komoe-sensei’s apartment, he also realized Index was staring down at him and that he was lying in a futon.

Surprisingly, he saw bright sunlight coming in through the window. On that night, Kamijou had indeed lost to Kanzaki and lost consciousness before his enemy. He had no memory of anything between that and waking up here.

Simply put, he was too dissatisfied with what had happened to even be glad he was alive.

Komoe-sensei was nowhere to be seen. She must have been out somewhere.

The only sign of her was some porridge sitting on the tea table next to Index. It may have been unfair to Index, but he doubted she could have cooked it given how she had asked for food after getting caught on his balcony, so he assumed Komoe-sensei had made the porridge.

"Honestly...You're treating me like I'm sick." Kamijou tried to move. "Ow, ow. What the hell? Since the sun's up, I must have been out all night. What time is it?"

"It wasn't just all night," replied Index.

The words seemed to catch a bit in her throat.

"?"

Kamijou raised an eyebrow and Index said, "It's been three days."

"Three days...Wait, what!? Why was I asleep for so long!?"

"I don't know!!" Index suddenly shouted.

Kamijou's breath caught in his throat at that shout that had seemed like a burst of anger.

"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know! I really didn't know anything! I was so focused on losing the flame magician that was at your house that I never gave any thought to the possibility that you would have to fight another magician!"

Her angry words were not aimed at Kamijou.

Her voice was tearing into herself and Kamijou was so overwhelmed he could not cut in.

"Touma, Komoe said you were collapsed in the middle of the road. She was the one that carried you back to the apartment. I was so delighted back then. I had no idea you were on the verge of death while I did nothing but delight in the thought that we had gotten away from that stupid magician!"

Index's words suddenly cut off.

This was followed by a slight gap just long enough for her to slowly breathe in and prepare for the main point of her rant.

"...I couldn't save you, Touma."

Index's small shoulders were trembling. She sat unmoving while biting her lower lip.

And yet Index shed no tears for herself.

Her heart would not allow even the slightest bit of sentiment or sympathy. Kamijou realized he could not give any words of consolation to someone who had sworn not to show any tears even for herself.

So he thought about something else instead.

Three days.

They could have attacked any number of times if they had wanted to. In fact, it would not have been surprising if they had retrieved Index three days ago when Kamijou had collapsed.

Then why? Kamijou gave a puzzled look in his heart. He could not tell what their enemy was thinking.

He also felt like the term “three days” held some kind of deeper meaning. With a feeling like bugs swarming along his back, Kamijou suddenly recalled something.

The time limit!

“? Touma, what is it?”

But Index merely looked at Kamijou in puzzlement. If she remembered him, the magicians must not have erased her memories yet. And from how she was acting, the symptoms had not set in either.

Kamijou felt relieved, but he also wanted to kill himself for wasting those precious final three days. However, he hid all that away in his chest. He did not want Index to know.

“...Dammit. I can’t move. What the hell? Why am I completely wrapped in bandages?”

“Does it hurt?”

“Does it hurt? If it did, I’d be writhing around. What’s with these bandages all over my body? Don’t you think you went a bit overboard?”

“...”

Index said nothing.

And then tears welled up in her eyes as if she was unable to bear it any longer.

That stabbed into Kamijou’s heart more than anything she could have shouted at him. And then he realized that *not feeling any pain was actually a bad thing*.

Komoe-sensei could not use recovery magic anymore. He was pretty sure Index had said that. It would be faster if he could just heal his wounds at the cost of a bit of MP like in an RPG, but it seemed the world was not that kind.

Kamijou looked at his right hand.

His utterly destroyed right hand was wrapped in bandages.

"Come to think of it, an esper that's been through the Curriculum can't use magic, right? What a pain."

"...Right. *The pathways are different* between a normal person and an esper," said the girl in an unsure tone. "It does seem those bandages will heal the wound...but your science sure is inconvenient. Our magic would be faster."

"That may be so, but I'll be fine without using anything like magic."

"...*What do you mean 'anything like'*?" Index pouted her lips grumpily at Kamijou's comment. "Touma, do you *still* not believe in magic? You're as stubborn as someone with an unrequited love."

"I didn't mean it like that." Kamijou shook his head with it still pressed against the pillow. "If at all possible, I don't want to see that face of yours when you talk about magic."

Kamijou recalled the look on her face when she gave her explanation of rune magic in the passageway of his dorm.

Those eyes had been as cold as the pale full moon and as precise as the gears of a clock.

Her words had been more proper than a bus tour guide's and yet more lacking in humanity than a bank ATM's.

That had been the existence known as Index Librorum Prohibitorum, the grimoire library.

He still could not believe that was the same as the girl sitting before him.

Or rather, he did not want to believe it.

"? Touma, do you not like explanations?"

"Hah...? Wait, do you not remember? You were talking about runes in front of Stiyl like some kind of puppet. To be honest, I didn't really like it."

"...Um...Oh, I see. I...awakened again."

"Awakened?"

The way she said it made it sound like that puppet-like form was her true self.

Like the kind girl before him was the false form.

"Yes, but please don't say too much about what I'm like when I awaken."

Kamijou was unable to ask why.

Before he could say anything, Index said, "Speaking when you aren't conscious is something like talking in your sleep. It's embarrassing. Also," she said. "It seems I become more and more like a cold machine and that scares me."

Index smiled.

She smiled as if she was actually about to collapse but did not want to worry anyone.

It was an expression that no machine could make.

It was a smile that only a human could make.

"...Sorry."

Kamijou simply apologized. He felt bad about thinking even for a second that she was anything other than human.

"It's fine, you idiot." Index's comment that made it unclear if it really was fine or not was accompanied by a small smile. "Are you hungry? We have porridge, fruit, and snack. A full course of staples for the sick."

"How am I supposed to eat with my hand-..."

He trailed off when he realized Index was holding chopsticks in her right fist.

"...Um, Index-san?"

"Hm? It's too late to start worrying about it now. If I hadn't fed you like this, you would have starved to death over the past three days."

"...Okay, fine. Just give me time to think, god."

“Why? Are you not hungry?” Index put down the chopsticks. “Do you need me to wash you?”

“.....Um?”

An indescribable feeling crept across Kamijou’s body.

(Huh? What is this incomparably bad feeling? What is this horrible unease that makes me think seeing a video of these past three days would make me die of embarrassment?)

“...Okay, I doubt you mean any harm by it, but just go sit over there, Index.”

“?” Index fell silent before saying, “But I am sitting down.”

“...”

Index surely had the best of intentions as she sat there holding a towel, but Kamijou found himself unable to attach the term “innocent” to it.

“What is it?”

“Oh...” Kamijou had fallen silent and now he tried to change the subject. “I was thinking about how you look from here in this futon.”

“Do I look weird? I am a nun, so I can nurse people.”

He did not think she looked weird. Her pure white nun’s habit and motherly behavior made her seem like an actual nun. (As insulting to her as it might be, he found this surprising.)

And more importantly...

The way she looked at him with those teary eyes and cheeks pink due to crying, she seemed quite...

But for some reason, he just could not bear to speak that aloud, so instead he said, “Oh, it’s nothing. I noticed that your nose hairs are silver too, is all.”

“.....”

Index’s smile freeze dried in place.

“Touma, Touma. Do you know what’s in my right hand?”

“Well, the porridge...No, wait! Don’t give it up to gravity!”

In the next instant, Kamijou Touma met the misfortune of having his vision filled with the white of the porridge and the bowl.

Part 3

Kamijou and Index learned firsthand that porridge was difficult to get out of a futon or pajamas. Index was battling with the goopy grains of rice with a hint of tears in her eyes, but a knock at the door drew her attention.

“Is that Komoe?”

“...Are you not going to apologize?”

He had not been burned since the porridge had already cooled by the time it was dumped on him, but Kamijou had still passed out again when the carbohydrate struck him because he was expecting it to be scorching hot.

“Huh? What are you doing in front of my house?” said a voice on the other side of the door.

It seemed Komoe-sensei had spotted whoever had knocked on the door as she returned from wherever she had been.

(Then who is it?)

Kamijou looked puzzled.

“Kamijou-chan, I’m not sure what’s going on, but it seems we have visitors.”

The door clicked open.

Kamijou’s shoulders jumped in surprise.

Behind Komoe-sensei stood two familiar magicians.

The two of them looked somewhat relieved upon seeing Index sitting like normal.

Kamijou frowned in suspicion. Naturally thinking, they were there to retrieve Index. However, they could have done that three days prior when Kamijou had collapsed. There was no reason for them to let her stay loose until the day of her “treatment”. They could have just confined her somewhere until it was time.

(...So why did they *wait until now* to come?)

Kamijou's muscles naturally tensed up as he recalled the power of the magicians' flames and sword.

However, Kamijou no longer had any reason to just fight Stiyl and Kanzaki. They were not "Evil Magic Cabal Forces A"; they were from Index's Church to take her into their care. Kamijou was worried about Index. In the end, he had nothing he could do but work with them and hand her over to the Church.

But that was simply from Kamijou's point of view.

The magicians had no reason to cooperate with Kamijou. Simply put, there was no reason why they couldn't just decapitate Kamijou right then and there and take Index away with them.

Stiyl seemed to enjoy the fact that Kamijou stiffened up upon seeing them, and he said, "Heh. It looks like we won't have to worry about you escaping with those injuries."

At that point, Kamijou finally realized what the "enemy" was trying to do.

On her own, Index could escape the magicians. After all, she had eluded the church for almost a year on her own. Even if they captured her and locked her up somewhere, she might be able to easily escape *if she was alone*.

With only a few days until the time limit, they might not have been able to catch up to her again if she had truly started fleeing again. If they imprisoned her somewhere, she might escape and it was possible she could escape even in the middle of the ceremony.

However, the same could not be said if she was burdened with an injured person like Kamijou.

That was why the magicians had not killed Kamijou. And why they had let him return to Index. They wanted Index to refuse to give up on him so that he would function as a convenient shackle.

They had overlooked him solely so they could more safely and surely take Index into their care.

"Leave, magicians."

And now Index stood between the magicians and Kamijou.

She stood up and spread her arms. She looked a bit like a sin-bearing cross.

It was all going exactly as the magicians had planned.

Index gave up on running because of the shackles that were Kamijou.

"..."

Stiyl and Kanzaki both twitched slightly.

It was as if they could not bear to watch it despite things progressing exactly as they expected.

Kamijou wondered what expression was on Index's face. Her back was facing him, so he could not see.

But those great magicians froze in place. Komoe-sensei was not the direct target of her feelings, but she still averted her gaze.

Kamijou wondered what they were feeling.

He wondered what it must feel like to be looked at like that by someone you would go so far as to kill for.

"...Stop, Index. They aren't our enem-..."

"Leave!!"

Index was not listening.

"Please... I'll go wherever you want and I'll do whatever you want. Just please, I beg of you..." A bit of a girlish cry was mixed in at the heart of the hostile tone she had worked up. "Just don't hurt Touma anymore."

Just how much damage did that do to those magicians who had once been her greatest comrades?

For an instant – just an instant – extremely pained smiles like they had given up on something appeared on the two magicians' faces.

But then their eyes froze over like a switch had been flipped.

These were not the gazes of people looking at their comrade; they were the chilling gazes of magicians.

Those gazes held their conviction to lessen the misfortune of the parting as much as possible rather than give her the cruel fortune of getting to know them.

Those gazes held their feelings for her that were strong enough for them to choose to abandon their comradeship and become her enemy.

Those things would not be destroyed.

Because they did not have the guts to tell her the truth, they could only watch on as the worst possible scenario played out.

"*The time limit comes in another 12 hours and 38 minutes*," announced Stiyl in the tone of a magician.

Index must not have known what he meant by "the time limit".

"We simply wanted to see if her shackles would function or not so we do not need to worry about her running off when the time comes. They were more effective than even we expected. If you do not want to have that toy taken from you, give up any hope of escape. Understand?"

It had to be an act. They had to want to celebrate in tearful joy that Index was okay. They had to want to rub her head and place their forehead against hers to check her temperature. That was how important she was to them.

All the horrible things Stiyl had said about Index were simply to perfect that act. He had to actually want to spread his own arms and act as Index's shield. Kamijou could not imagine how much mental strength it would take to do what he was doing.

Index gave no response.

The two magicians did and said nothing more. They merely left the room.

(Why did it turn into this...?)

Kamijou gritted his teeth.

"Are you okay?"

Finally, Index lowered her raised arms and slowly turned back towards Kamijou.

Kamijou instinctually closed his eyes. He could not bear to look.

He could not bear to look at Index's face covered in tears and relief.

"If I make a deal with them..." He heard a voice in the darkness. "I can keep your life from being destroyed anymore, Touma. I won't let them intrude on your life anymore, so don't worry."

"..."

Kamijou could not respond. He merely thought in the darkness of his closed eyes.

(...Can I let go of our memories together?)

Part 4

Night came.

Index was asleep next to the futon. Because they had been asleep since before the sun had set, the room's lights were not on.

It seemed Komoe-sensei had headed for the public bath leaving the two of them alone in the room.

Kamijou wasn't entirely sure that was so because Kamijou had fallen asleep himself due to his poor condition and it had been nighttime by the time he had awakened. Komoe-sensei's room had no clock, so he did not know what time it was. The air felt especially cold as the term "time limit" crept into his mind.

Index must have been incredibly nervous over the past three days because she had fallen asleep after being assaulted by weariness. She was asleep with her mouth hanging open and she looked like a child who had exhausted herself nursing her sick mother.

It seemed Index had completely abandoned her original goal of merely getting to an Anglican church. If Kamijou forced himself to stand up in his beaten up state and tried to take her to a church, she would probably resist him.

He felt a little embarrassed as she occasionally muttered his name in her sleep.

Index's defenseless kitten-like face gave Kamijou a complex feeling.

No matter how much determination she showed, it was all going to go the way the church wanted in the end. Whether Index made it safely to a church or was captured by the magicians partway there, she would still end up being taken by Necessarius and having her memories erased.

Suddenly the phone rang.

The phone in Komoe-sensei's room was a black rotary phone that could be called an antique. Kamijou slowly looked over at the phone that was giving off an old-fashioned ring that sounded like an alarm clock.

He felt he should really answer the phone, but he also didn't know if it was right to answer Komoe-sensei's phone without her permission. Nevertheless, he grabbed the receiver. He didn't really care so much about answering the phone, but he would feel bad if the noisy ringing woke Index up.

"It's me...You can tell who I am, right?"

The voice coming from the receiver was a polite female voice. Even over the phone, he could tell she was trying to keep her voice low as if speaking in secret.

“Kanzaki...?”

“No, it would be better if we do not learn each other’s names. Is she....Is Index there?”

“She’s asleep, but...Wait, how do you know this number?”

“We knew the address, so it was not hard to look up.” Kanzaki’s voice was not calm. “If she’s asleep, that’s perfect. Listen to what I have to say.”

“?” Kamijou frowned suspiciously.

“As I mentioned before, the time limit is tonight at midnight. We have put together a schedule to end everything by that time.”

Kamijou’s heart froze.

He knew that there was no other way to save Index. He knew that, but when the “end” was thrust before him like that, he felt cornered.

“But...” Kamijou’s breathing grew shallow. “Why are you telling me this? Just stop. If you tell me this, I might end up wanting to resist you even if it gets me killed.”

“...”

The voice from the receiver fell silent.

It was not complete silence, though. He could hear suppressed breathing mixed in. It was a very human silence.

“...Then do you need time for your farewells?”

“Wha-...?”

“I will be honest with you. When we first had to erase her memories, we spent the three days prior solely focused on creating memories. On the final night, we did nothing but cling to her sobbing. I believe you have the right to that same opportunity.”

“Don’t fuck with me.” Kamijou thought he was going to crush the receiver in his grip. “That’s the same thing as giving up! You’re just telling me to give up the right to try!! You’re just telling me to give up the right to desperately challenge this!!”

“...”

“If you don’t understand, let me tell you one thing: I haven’t given up yet. In fact, I won’t be able to give up no matter what! If I fail a hundred times, I’ll get back up a hundred times. If I fail a thousand times, I’ll crawl to my feet a thousand times! That’s all there is to it! I’ll do what you couldn’t!!”

“This is not a conversation or a negotiation. It is merely a message and an order. Whatever you intend to do, we will recover her at the appointed time. If you try to stop us, we will destroy you.” The magician’s voice was as smooth as the voice of a receptionist at a bank. “You may be trying to negotiate with me counting on the human kindness left within me, but that is exactly why I am giving you this strict order.” Kanzaki’s voice was as cold as a drawn Japanese sword in the night air. “You will say farewell to her and leave before we arrive. Your role is nothing more than being shackles for her. The fate of chains that have lost their purpose is to be cut.”

The magician’s words were not merely words of hostility or scorn.

She sounded like she was trying to stop someone with a wound from struggling so they would not tear the wound open further.

“F...Fuck that.” Her tone oddly irritated Kamijou and he snapped back at her. “Everyone is shoving their own incompetence onto me. You two are magicians, right? I thought magicians made the impossible possible!? But look at you! Can you really not do anything about this with magic!? Can you really stand before Index and proudly tell her you tried every last option!?”

“...*Nothing can be done about this with magic.* I wouldn’t be proud of it, but I find it impossible to lie to that girl,” said Kanzaki as she gritted her teeth. “If we could do anything, we would have done it long ago. No one would want to use this cruel ultimatum if they did not have to.”

“...What?”

“It seems you cannot even give up if you do not understand the situation. I don’t think this is a good use of your last moments with her, but *I will give you a helping hand of despair*.” The magician spoke smoothly as if she was reading from the bible. “Her perfect memory is not a type of esper power nor is it a type of magic. It is a natural part of her. It is the same as bad eyesight or allergies. *It is not a type of curse that can be broken*.”

“...”

“We are magicians. With any circumstances created by magic, there is a danger of them being dispelled by magic.”

“I thought it was an anti-occult defense system created by a magic specialist? Can’t you do something with Index’s 103,000 grimoires!? She said that controlling those would

give you the power of a god, but if it can't even heal one girl's head, it doesn't sound so great to me!"

"Oh, you're referring to a Magic God. The Church is extremely afraid of Index rebelling. That is why they put a 'collar' on her so that maintenance only the Church can perform must be carried out once a year by erasing her memories. Do you really think they would leave any possibility of her removing that collar herself?" Kanzaki was speaking quietly. "There is probably a bias in her 103,000 grimoires. For instance, she was probably not allowed to memorize any grimoires that dealt with manipulating memories. I would be willing to bet that the Church has put up some security like that."

"God damn it," Kamijou cursed under his breath. "...You said eighty percent of Index's brain is taken up by the knowledge of the 103,000 grimoires, right?"

"Yes. It is apparently actually 85%, but it is impossible for us magicians to destroy those grimoires. An original grimoire cannot even be destroyed by an inquisitioner after all. This means that we can only hollow out the remaining fifteen percent, her memories, to increase the empty space in her head."

"...Then what about us on the science side?"

"..."

She fell silent.

Kamijou wondered if it was possible. The magicians knew their field, magic, backward and forwards, and they couldn't do it. If they were still not going to give up, it was only natural to move to a different field.

For example, there was science.

And if they were going there, it made sense to have someone to act as a go-between. It was the same as having a local person help you out when you had to walk through an unfamiliar country and negotiate with various people.

"...There was a time when I thought the same thing."

Kamijou had not expected her to say that.

"To be honest, I simply did not know what to do. The world of magic that I had believed in absolutely was unable to save a single girl. I understand the feeling of trying to grasp at straws."

"..."

Kamijou had a feeling what was coming next.

“It just does not feel right to hand her over to science.”

He had expected it, but actually hearing it still felt like being stabbed in the brain.

“I know that you people cannot do something that we cannot. Your crude methods of filling her body with some unknown drug and chopping her up with a scalpel will do nothing but unnecessarily shorten her life. *I do not want to see her be violated by machines*.”

“Okay, that’s it. How the hell can you say that when you’ve never even tried it? I have a question for you. You keep talking about destroying memories, but do you really know what exactly memory loss is?”

No response came.

(She must really not know much about science.)

Kamijou pulled some Curriculum textbooks that were lying on the ground towards himself with his foot. It was a recipe for esper development including a mix of neuroscience, rare psychology, and reactionary drugs.

“How can you talk on about a perfect memory and losing memories when you don’t even know what it is? There are a lot of different kinds of memory loss.” He started flipping through the pages. “There’s aging...I guess like senility. And apparently you can lose your memories from getting drunk with alcohol. There’s a brain disease called Alzheimer’s and there’s TIA where blood stops flowing to your brain and your memories disappear. Memory loss is also a side effect of general anesthetics like halothane, isoflurane, and fentanyl, of derivatives of barbituric acid, and of drugs like benzodiazepine.”

“??? Benzo...what?”

Kanzaki’s voice was surprisingly weak for her, but Kamijou had no duty to explain it all to her, so he ignored her.

“Simply put, there are tons of ways to medically eliminate someone’s memories. It means that there are methods you people can’t use that can get rid of her 103,000 grimoires, you idiot.”

Kanzaki’s breathing froze.

However, these methods did not remove the memories. Instead, they damaged the brain cells. An old man with dementia was not able to remember more just because he lost some memories.

But Kamijou left that part out. Even if it was just a bluff, he had to stop the magicians from forcibly erasing her memories.

“And this is Academy City. There are plenty of espers that can manipulate people’s minds with powers like Psychometry or Marionette. Not to mention that there are research facilities all over the place. It’s way too soon to give up hope. Apparently, there’s even a Level 5 at Tokiwadai who can remove people’s memories just by touching them.”

That was where the last ray of hope truly lay.

No voice came from the receiver.

Kamijou continued on to truly defeat Kanzaki who was starting to show signs of hesitation.

“Well? What will you do, magician? Are you still going to get in my way? Are you going to give up on trying when someone’s life hangs in the balance?”

“...Those words are much too cheap to convince an enemy,” said Kanzaki with a slight tone of self-derision. “We have a tried and true method of saving her life. I cannot trust in this untested gamble of yours. Do you really think you can change that with some reckless statement?”

Kamijou remained silent for a bit.

He tried to come up with a rebuttal, but he could not think of anything.

He had no choice but to accept it.

“...True enough. In the end, we just can’t understand each other.”

He had no choice but to accept that she was his enemy despite the fact that there was a chance she could have understood because she had been in the same situation once.

“Yes. If people who wished for the same thing would always become allies, the world would be completely filled with peace,” she said.

Kamijou’s grip on the receiver strengthened slightly.

That beaten up right hand was his sole weapon and it could negate even the systems created by god.

“...Then you are my arch enemy and I will defeat you,” he said.

“Given the differences in our specs, the result of that is immensely clear. Do you still intend to call this hand?”

“Perfect. I raise. I just have to invite you into circumstances where I am guaranteed to win.”

Kamijou bared his canines towards the receiver.

Stiyl had definitely not been weaker than Kamijou. Kamijou had only won because Stiyl had lost to the sprinkler system. In short, differences in strength could be made up with strategy.

“Just so you know, when that girl collapses next, you should think of it as too late.” Kanzaki’s words were as sharp as the tip of a sword. “We will be there at midnight. You do not have much time left, but make your final useless struggles good ones.”

“You’re not gonna see me cry, magician. I’m gonna save her and steal all your scenes.”

“Stay there and wait for us,” she said and hung up.

Kamijou silently put down the receiver and looked up at the ceiling as if he was staring up at the moon in the night sky.

“Dammit!”

He swung his right fist down on the tatami mat as if he was punching an opponent he had pinned down. His wounded right hand did not hurt even slightly. His head was in such chaos that his pain had been blown away.

He had acted quite full of himself on the phone, but he was not a brain surgeon or a professor of neuroscience. Something might be able to be done scientifically, but that normal high school student had no idea what exactly that might be.

Even so, he could not just stop.

He felt an intense impatience and unease as if he had been told to walk back to town after being left in the middle of a desert where nothing but the horizon could be seen in every direction.

Once the time limit came, the magicians would mercilessly destroy Index’s memories. They were probably already lying in wait near the apartment planning to capture her if they tried to escape.

He had no idea why the magicians did not just attack then. It could just be out of sympathy for Kamijou and it could be because they did not want to move Index right before the time limit. He had no idea which of those it was or even if it was something else.

He looked at Index’s face as she lay curled up asleep on the tatami mats.

He then stood tall, all fired up.

Academy City had more than one thousand research facilities both large and small, but a first year student like Kamijou had no connections with any of them. He was going to have to contact Komoe-sensei.

Whether anything could be done in less than a day was a valid question. Index's time limit was drawing near, but Kamijou had a secret plan for that. If her brain would burst if she continued to add more memories, couldn't he buy her some time by putting her to sleep so she couldn't gain any more memories?

A Romeo and Juliet-like drug that put one in a state of apparent death sounded very unrealistic, but he did not have to go that far. Basically, he just had to put her to sleep with some laughing gas, a general anesthetic used for surgeries.

He didn't have to worry about her dreaming while she was asleep and creating memories that way. Kamijou had learned a bit about the system of sleeping in the esper development lessons. He was pretty sure that people only dreamed in a state of light sleep. Once one entered a state of deep sleep, *your brain rested to the point that it even forgot that it had dreamed*.

Therefore, Kamijou needed two things.

The first was to contact Komoe-sensei and get some help from a research facility that dealt in either neuroscience or maybe esper powers related to the mind.

The second was to slip past the magicians and get Index out of there or to create circumstances in which he could defeat the two magicians.

Kamijou decided to start with calling Komoe-sensei.

But when he thought about it, he did not actually know her cell number.

"Wow, I'm an idiot..." he said almost wanting to kill himself as he looked around the room.

He saw nothing out of the ordinary, but the cramped 4.5 tatami room looked like an unknown kind of labyrinth. With no lights on, the room was as dark as the sea at night and the books and knocked over beer cans littering the floor looked like they could be hiding something behind them. When he thought about all the drawers in the dresser and cabinet, he felt like his consciousness was going to slip away.

Trying to find a cell phone number that might not even be there seemed like an insane task. It felt like he had to search through a giant landfill to find a single battery he had accidently thrown out the day before.

Even so, he could not stop. Kamijou started turning over everything in the area searching for a memo or something that would have her cell phone number written on it. Every minute and every second counted, so searching for something that might not even

be there was hardly a sane thing to be doing. Every time his heart beat, it got on his nerves and every time he breathed, more impatience started burning within him. At first glance, it may have looked like he was just throwing everything near him around in anger.

He checked deep in the cabinet and he pulled out all the books on the bookshelf. While Kamijou was rampaging around, Index continued to sleep curled up on the ground which made it look like time had stopped for her.

Seeing her in complete "cat in the kotatsu" mode, he oddly felt like hitting her, but at that same time, a scrap of paper stuck in a notebook that seemed to be for a household account book fluttered to the ground at his feet.

It was Komoe-sensei's itemized cell phone bill.

Kamijou immediately grabbed the scrap of paper and found an eleven digit number written on it. It seemed she had spent an entire 142,500 yen on the cell phone the previous month. She must have gotten stuck with some terrible phone. Normally, he would have rolled around laughing for about three days at that discovery, but that was hardly the time. He had to make a call, so he headed for the black phone.

He had a feeling it had taken quite a bit of time finding the phone number.

He had no idea if a few hours had passed or if it had only been a few minutes. Kamijou's heart felt so cornered that his sense of time had been thrown off that much.

He called the number and Komoe-sensei answered after the third ring as if she had timed it.

About to foam at the mouth, Kamijou yelled an "explanation" that was hard for even him to understand because his mind just couldn't sort out what he wanted to say.

"...Hm? My major is in Pyrokinesis, so I don't have many connections in Mind Hound related things. You could probably use the Takizawa Institution or the Todai University hospital, but their equipment is second-rate. Calling in a guest esper who excels at that field would be a safe bet. I know Yotsuba-san in Judgment is a Level 4 Telepath and she would likely be willing to help."

He hadn't given her much of an explanation, but Komoe-sensei still rattled off an answer.

Kamijou seriously decided that he should have consulted with her from the beginning.

"But Kamijou-chan. Even if the researching teachers are terrible people who have flipped their day with their night, they probably wouldn't like to be called on by a student at this hour. How about we just prepare a bed in a facility for now?"

“What? ...No, sensei. I’m sorry, but this is urgent. Can’t we just wake them now?”

“But,” said Komoe-sensei sounding a little annoyed, “it’s already midnight.”

Kamijou suddenly froze in place.

The room had no clock. But even if it had one, Kamijou would not have had the courage to check it.

His gaze zeroed in on Index.

She was curled up fast asleep on the tatami mats, but her arms and legs that were sprawled about weren’t moving. They weren’t moving at all.

“...In...dex?” Kamijou called out timidly.

Index did not move.

Just like someone with a fever, she had fallen deeply asleep and wasn’t responding.

A voice came from the receiver.

But Kamijou dropped it before he could gather what was being said. A terrible sweat had started coming from his palms. A very bad feeling weighed in his gut like a bowling ball had been dropped there.

He heard footsteps in the passageway leading to the apartment.

"–*We will be there at midnight. You do not have much time left, but make your final useless struggles good ones.*"

The instant Kamijou recalled those words, the apartment door was kicked open from the outside.

Pale moonlight fell into the room like sunlight shining through the leaves into a thick section of a forest.

With the perfect circle of the moon to their backs, the two magicians stood in the doorway.

At that time, the hands of clocks all across Japan indicated it was precisely midnight.

That meant that a certain girl’s time limit was up.

That was what it meant.

CHAPTER 4

The Exorcist Chooses the End.

(N)Ever_Say_Good_bye.

With the moonlight at their backs, the two magicians stepped through the door still in their outdoor shoes.

Stiyl and Kanzaki may have returned, but Index did not stand in their way this time. She did not shout at them to leave. She was covered in sweat like she was suffering from a fever and her breathing was so shallow it sounded like you could blow it out like a candle flame.

A headache.

A headache so great it felt like even the slight sound of accumulating snow would split her head open.

"..."

Kamijou and the magicians exchanged no words.

Still in his outdoor shoes, Stiyl pushed Kamijou aside as the boy stood there dumbfounded. The shove had not held much force, but Kamijou was unable to hold his ground. He fell onto his butt atop the old tatami mats as if all strength had left his body.

Stiyl did not even look in Kamijou's direction.

He knelt down next to Index whose limbs were sprawled out limply. The magician then muttered something under his breath.

His shoulders were trembling.

He was a perfect representation of the human anger you felt when someone precious to you was hurt before your eyes.

"Based on Crowley's Moonchild, we will use the method of capturing an angel to create a chain of events that will summon, capture, and have a fairy work to our ends."

Having gathered his resolve, Stiyl stood up.

His expression when he turned around was void of the slightest hint of humanity.

His face was the face of a magician who had given up his humanity to save a certain girl.

“Kanzaki, give me your help. *We need to destroy her memories*.”

Kamijou felt like those words stabbed into the most fragile part of his heart.

“Ah...”

He knew that robbing Index of her memories was only meant to save her.

And Kamijou had once told Kanzaki that they should not hesitate to destroy her memories if they were truly acting solely for Index’s sake. No matter how many times she lost her memories, they just had to give her even better memories next time. That way she could look forward to the coming year even if she had to lose her memories.

But...

Wasn’t that just a compromise to be made after exhausting all other options?

“...”

Without realizing it, Kamijou had begun clenching his fist hard enough to crack his nails.

Could he do it? Could he just give up? Any number of research facilities dealing in people’s memories and minds existed in Academy City. Could he really give up here when there might be a happier way to save Index in one of those facilities? Using old fashioned magic would destroy the memories that she cared about the most. Was it really okay to continue to rely on the world’s easiest and the world’s cruelest method.

No, that was not what mattered.

All that boring reasoning and rationalization no longer mattered.

Could he...Could Kamijou Touma bear to have the week he spent with Index reverted to a blank slate like someone was deleting the save data for a video game?

“...Wait.”

Kamijou Touma raised his head.

He directly and honestly raised his head with the intention of opposing the magicians who were acting to save Index.

“Wait, please wait! Just a bit longer! Just a bit! There are 2.3 million espers in Academy City and there are over a thousand research institutions running it all. There’s Psychometry, Marionette, Telekinesis, and Materialize! We have tons of espers who can manipulate minds and labs that develop the mind! If we get their help, we might not have to rely on this horrible method!”

“...”

Stiyl Magnus said nothing.

Even so, Kamijou continued to shout at the flame magician.

“You don’t want to us this method either, right!? Deep down in your heart, you’re praying that there is some other way, right!? Then just wait a bit longer. I will make sure to find an ending where everyone is smiling and everyone is happy! So...!!”

“...”

Stiyl Magnus said nothing.

Kamijou had no idea why he was going so far. He had only met Index a week before. He had lived for sixteen years before that without knowing her and there was no reason why he would not be able to live a normal life without her from then on.

There was no reason why, yet he knew he could not.

He did not know why. He was not even sure if he needed a reason why.

He just knew it hurt.

It hurt to think that her words, her smile, and her mannerisms would never be directed towards him again.

It hurt to think that the memories of that week would easily be wiped clean by someone else as if a reset button was being pressed.

Just thinking of the possibility caused a great pain in the most precious and the kindest part of his heart.

“...”

Silence filled the room.

It was like the silence in an elevator. Rather than a silence where there was nothing at all to make noise, this was that odd silence filled with only the faint sound of breathing where the people there were merely remaining silent.

Kamijou raised his head.

With great caution, he looked at the magician.

“Is that all you want to say, you self-righteous failure?”

And...

That was all the runic magician Stiyl Magnus said.

It was not that he had not listened to what Kamijou said.

His ears had picked up on every single one of Kamijou’s words, he had processed them, and he had comprehended their meaning as well as the feelings hidden below the surface.

And yet Stiyl Magnus did not move so much as an eyebrow.

Kamijou’s words had not hit home with him in the slightest.

“Out of the way,” said Stiyl.

Kamijou had no idea how the muscles of his face were moving.

Without so much as a sigh, Stiyl said to Kamijou, “Look.”

He pointed.

Before Kamijou could look over in the direction Stiyl was pointing, he grabbed Kamijou’s hair.

“Look!!”

“Ah...” Kamijou’s voice froze over.

Before his eyes, he saw Index who looked like her breathing could stop at any moment.

“Can you say the same thing in front of her?” Stiyl’s voice was trembling. “Can you say the same thing while she is mere seconds away from death!? Can you say the same thing while she is in too much pain to even open her eyes!? Can you tell her to wait because you have some things you’d like to try out!!?”

"..."

Index's fingers stirred. It was unclear if she was barely conscious or if she was moving subconsciously, but she desperately moved her hand that seemed as heavy as lead and tried to touch Kamijou's face.

It was as if she was desperately trying to protect Kamijou as the magician grabbed his hair.

It was as if she did not feel her own intense pain even mattered.

"If you can, then you are not human! Anyone who could see her like this and still inject her with some untested drug, let some strange doctor mess with her body, and fill her body with drugs can't possibly be human!" Stiyl's shout stabbed through Kamijou's eardrums and into his brain. "Answer me, esper. Are you still human or are you a monster who has abandoned his humanity!?"

"..."

Kamijou could not answer.

Stiyl went in for one last blow like stabbing a sword into the heart of someone who was already dead.

He pulled a necklace with a small cross on it from his pocket.

"This tool is needed to destroy her memories." Stiyl waved the cross in front of Kamijou's face. "As you might guess, it's a magical item. If you touch it with your right hand, it should lose all power just like my Innocentius."

The cross swayed back and forth in front of Kamijou like a five yen coin being used for a cheap bit of hypnotism.

"*But can you negate it, esper?*"

As if he had frozen in place, Kamijou stared up at Stiyl.

"When that girl is suffering before your very eyes, *can you take this from her*!? If you believe so much in your own power, then negate it, you mutant who thinks he's a hero!"

Kamijou looked.

He looked at the cross swaying before his eyes. He looked at that abominable cross that could rob people of their memories.

As Stiyl had said, he could stop the deletion of Index's memories if he took that from him.

It was nothing difficult. He just had to reach out his hand and lightly touch it with the tips of his fingers.

That was all. It should have been so easy.

Kamijou clenched his trembling right hand until it was as hard as rock.

But he could not do it.

For the moment, magic was the one safe and surefire way to save Index.

How could he take that from the girl who was suffering and putting up with it all?

He simply could not.

"Our preparations will be complete at 0:15 at the earliest. We will destroy her memories using the power of Leo," Stiyl said to Kamijou in disinterest.

0:15...He probably had less than ten minutes left.

"...!!"

He wanted to shout out and tell them to stop. He wanted to yell out and tell them to wait. However, Kamijou would not be the one who would suffer as a result. The cost of Kamijou's selfishness would all come back to Index.

(Just accept it.)

"*–My name is Index.*"

(Just accept it already.)

"*–Anyway, it would be great if you could feed me enough food to fill me up.*"

(Just accept that you, Kamijou Touma, have no power or right to save Index!)

Kamijou was unable to shout or cry out.

He could only stare up at the ceiling, grit his back teeth, and let tears he could not hold back fall from his eyes.

"...Hey, magician," muttered Kamijou blankly as he continued to stare up at the ceiling and lean against the bookshelf. "How do you think I should say farewell to her in the end?"

“We do not have time for this nonsense.”

“I see,” replied Kamijou blankly.

Kamijou would have remained frozen in place there, but Stiyl did not let up.

“Leave this place, monster.” The magician looked at Kamijou. “Your right hand negated my flames. I still don’t understand how it works, but we can’t have it interfering with the spell we are going to use.”

“I see,” replied Kamijou blankly.

Kamijou gave a small smile like he had become a corpse.

“It was the same with that wound on her back. Why is there never anything I can do?”

“How should I know?” Stiyl’s eyes seemed to say.

“I can destroy even the systems of god with this right hand.” Kamijou seemed to crumble. “So why can’t I save just one suffering girl?”

He smiled.

He did not curse fate and he did not blame it on misfortune. He merely reflected on his own powerlessness.

Kanzaki looked at him with a pained expression and said, “We still have ten minutes until we perform the ceremony at 0:15.”

Stiyl looked at Kanzaki as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

But Kanzaki only smiled when she looked at Stiyl.

“On the night we first swore to erase her memories, we spent the whole night crying by her side. Isn’t that right, Stiyl?”

“...” Stiyl fell silent for a moment as if his breath had caught in his throat. “B-but we have no idea what he’ll do. What if he attempts a double suicide while we aren’t looking?”

“If he was willing to do that, don’t you think he would have touched the cross right away? You only used the real cross rather than a fake because you were already sure he was a human, right?”

“But...”

“Whatever we do, we cannot perform the ceremony until the time is right. If he has any regrets left, he might try to stop us mid-ceremony, Stiyl.”

Stiyl gritted his teeth.

He held himself back like he was on the verge of lunging and ripping out Kamijou’s throat like a beast.

“You have ten minutes. Okay!?”

He then spun around and left the apartment.

Kanzaki silently followed Stiyl from the room, but a heartbreaking smile could be seen in her eyes.

The door closed.

Only Kamijou and Index remained in the room. Those ten minutes had been gained at the risk of not Kamijou’s life, but Index’s. And yet Kamijou had no idea what he was supposed to do.

“Ah...Kh. Fh...”

A few odd noises escaped Index’s lips as she lay limply sprawled out. Kamijou jumped in shock.

Index opened her eyes slightly. She seemed to be wondering why she was in the futon and worrying about where Kamijou was when he was supposed to be the one in the futon.

She had completely forgotten about herself.

“...”

Kamijou gritted his teeth. He was more afraid of standing before her in that moment than he was of fighting those magicians.

But he could not run away either.

“Touma?”

Kamijou approached the futon and Index breathed a sigh of relief. The look on her sweat-covered face was one of relief from the bottom of her heart.

“...I’m sorry,” said Kamijou as he hung his head down to meet Index’s gaze.

"...? Touma, there's some kind of magic circle in this room."

Index had been unconscious, so she did not know that it had been drawn by those two magicians. She tilted her head to the side in a girlish sign of puzzlement as she looked at the symbols drawn on the wall near the futon.

"..."

For an instant Kamijou clenched his back teeth.

It was for just an instant. Before anyone could have noticed, his expression was back to normal.

"...It's for recovery magic. We can't have your headaches being this bad, now can we?"

"? Magic...Who's casting it?"

At that point, a certain possibility entered Index's mind.

"!?"

Index forced her unmoving body to move and tried to spring up. When her face twisted in pain, Kamijou grabbed her shoulders and pushed her back into the futon.

"Touma! Have the magicians come back!? Touma, you need to get out of here!!"

Index looked at Kamijou with an expression of disbelief. She knew just how dangerous magicians were, so she was worried for Kamijou from the bottom of her heart.

"...It's okay, Index."

"Touma!"

"It's over. ...It's already over."

"Touma," said Index quietly and then all strength left her body.

Kamijou had no idea what expression was on his face.

"...I'm sorry," said Kamijou. "I will get stronger. I will never lose again. I will get strong enough to kick the asses of every last person who would treat you like this..."

Even crying would have been cowardly.

Inviting her sympathy was unthinkable.

"...Just wait. Next time, I will make sure to truly save you."

How did he look in Index's eyes?

How did he sound in Index's ears?

"I understand. I'll wait."

Because she did not know the situation, it had to seem to Index that Kamijou had lost to the enemy and sold Index for his own safety.

And yet she smiled.

Her smile was battered. Her smile was perfect. Her smile looked like it would crumble at any moment. And yet she smiled.

Kamijou could not understand.

He could no longer understand how she could be that trusting of people.

But that was when he made up his mind.

"Once your headaches get better, let's take out these magicians and win your freedom," he said.

"I'd like to go to the beach after that, but we'll have to wait until my supplementary lessons are over," he said.

"Would you like to transfer to my school once summer vacation is over?" he asked.

"I'd like to make all sorts of memories," Index said.

"You will," promised Kamijou.

He pushed on with the lie.

It did not matter what was true and what was false. He no longer needed the kind of cold, cruel, proper justice that could not comfort even a single girl.

The boy by the name of Kamijou Touma did not need justice or evil.

Fox words were more than enough for him.

And that was why Kamijou Touma did not shed a single tear.

Not even one.

"..."

With a light noise, all strength left Index's hand and it fell atop the futon.

Having passed out once more, Index looked like a corpse.

"But..." Kamijou softly bit his lip as he looked at Index's feverish face. "What kind of horrible ending is this?"

He tasted blood from where he was biting his lip.

He hated how he knew what was happening was wrong and yet he was powerless to stop it. Yes. Kamijou could do nothing. He could not do anything about the 103,000 grimoires taking up 85% of Index's brain or to protect the memories filling up the fifteen percent left over.

"...Huh?"

As hopeless thoughts raced through his mind, Kamijou suddenly felt something was off.

85%?

Kamijou looked back at Index's feverish face.

85%. Yes, that was what Kanzaki had said. 85% of Index's brain was filled with the 103,000 grimoires she had memorized. The pressure that put on her brain meant she could only fit a year's worth of memories in the remaining fifteen percent. If she added any more memories than that, her brain would burst.

(But wait a second.)

How could fifteen percent only hold a year's worth of memories?

Kamijou had no idea how rare a condition a perfect memory was. However, he was pretty sure it was not so rare that Index was the only person in the world with the condition.

And the others with a perfect memory did not use some ridiculous method like magic to erase their memories.

If it was true that fifteen percent of the brain could only hold a year's worth of memories...

"*...That means they'd die at about six or seven years old.*"

If the condition was like some kind of incurable disease in that way, wouldn't it be more well-known?

Also...

Where had Kanzaki gotten those figures of 85% and 15%?

Who had told her that?

Was the information about 85% of the brain even accurate?

"...They were tricked."

What if Kanzaki actually knew nothing about neuroscience? What if she had simply accepted what her superiors in the Church had told her?

Kamijou had a very bad feeling.

He rushed over to the black phone in the corner of the room. Komoe-sensei was out somewhere. He had searched all over the room and found her cell phone number not too long before, so that was not an issue.

The mechanical ringing sound that had a way of really aggravating people continued for a bit.

Kamijou had a feeling something was mistaken in Kanzaki's description of a perfect memory. What if that mistake was intentionally put there by the church? They might be hiding some kind of secret there.

With a static-like noise, the phone connected.

"Sensei!!" Kamijou shouted almost entirely reflexively.

"Ohh, is that you, Kamijou-chan~? You should not be using my phone~"

"...You sound happy."

"Yes~... I am at a public bath right now~. I have a coffee milk in one hand while I test out a new massage chair~. Yes~."

"..."

Kamijou thought he was about to crush the receiver in his grip, but Index's situation was more important at the moment.

“Sensei, please just listen quietly to what I have to say. The truth is...”

Kamijou asked about perfect memories.

What were they? Did a year’s worth of memories really use up fifteen percent of the brain? In other words, was it a condition that set one’s lifespan at only six or seven years?

“Of course not~.” Komoe-sensei cut it all down in one short sentence. “It is true that a perfect memory makes you unable to forget garbage memories like the flyer for a sale from last year at a supermarket~. But *it isn’t like the brain can burst from that*~. They merely bring their a hundred years’ worth of memories with them to their grave~. *The human brain can hold up to 140 years’ worth of memories after all*~.”

Kamijou’s heart skipped a beat.

“B-but what if they were learning things at a tremendous rate? Like what if they used their memory ability to memorize all the books in a library? Would their brain burst then?”

“Sigh... Kamijou-chan, I can see why you fail all your development lessons~,” said Komoe-sensei happily. “Listen up, Kamijou-chan~. People do not have just one type of memory. Things like language and knowledge fall under semantic memories, things like growing accustomed to certain actions falls under procedural memories, and what we most often think of as memories fall under episodic memories~. There are all sorts of types~. All sorts~.”

“Um, sensei... I don’t really understand what you mean.”

“Basically~.” Komoe-sensei loved to explain things, so she was delighted. “Each type of memory goes into different containers~. Think of it like burnable trash and unburnable trash~. If you get hit on the head and get amnesia, you don’t just start talking gibberish and crawling around on the ground, right~?”

“So...”

“Yes~. No matter how many library books the person memorized, that would only increase the amount of semantic memory~. *According to neuroscience, it is absolutely impossible* for that to overwhelm the person’s episodic memory~.”

Kamijou felt like he had received that supposed hit on the head.

The receiver slipped from his hand. The fallen receiver struck the hook, ending the call, but Kamijou no longer had time to care.

The Church had lied to Kanzaki.

Index's perfect memory was not a danger to her life.

"But...why?" Kamijou muttered in stunned shock.

Yes, why? Why would the Church lie and say Index would die in a year when that was not true?

Also, the suffering Index was going through before Kamijou's eyes certainly did not look like a lie. If it was not being caused by her perfect memory, then why was she suffering?

"...Ha."

After thinking that far, Kamijou suddenly laughed out loud.

Yes. *The Church had put a collar on Index.*

A collar that made her require maintenance from the church every year to survive. A collar that assured that Index would not use the 103,000 grimoires she held to betray them.

What if Index did not need the techniques and spells of the Church to survive?

What if she could perfectly well live on her own without the help of the Church?

In that case, the Church would never be able to leave Index be. If she could just go off and disappear with the 103,000 grimoires, they would feel the need to put a collar on her.

To repeat, the Church had put a collar on Index.

That made things simple.

There had originally been nothing wrong with Index's head, but the Church had done something to it.

"...Ha ha."

For example, what if they had done something similar to filling the bottom of a ten liter bucket with cement so only a liter of water could fit?

They had done something to Index's head so her brain would burst after only a year's worth of memories.

That way, Index had to rely on the techniques and spells of the Church.

That way, Index's comrades would have to choke back their tears and do what the Church wanted.

They had put together a devilish program that took even human kindness and sympathy into account.

"...But that doesn't matter."

Yes, it really did not matter.

What mattered and what he had to worry about there was just one thing. That was the identity of the Church's security that was making Index suffer. Academy City that controlled the espers like Kamijou was the cutting edge of science. What was it that Necessarius that controlled those magicians was the cutting edge of in the same way?

Yes, the supernatural power known as magic.

And Kamijou Touma's right hand could negate that with a touch even if it was the systems of god.

In that room with no clock, Kamijou wondered what time it was.

He probably did not have much time left until the ceremony began. He looked over to the apartment door. If he told the truth to the magicians on the other side of that door, would they believe him? The answer was no. Kamijou was just a high school student. He did not have a medical license in neuroscience, and his relationship with the magicians might as well have been called "enemies". He doubted they would believe him.

Kamijou lowered his gaze.

He looked at Index who was sprawled out on the futon. She was soaked all over with an unpleasant sweat and her silver hair looked like a bucket of water had been dumped on her. Her face was feverishly red and her eyebrows occasionally moved in pain.

"–*When that girl is suffering before your very eyes,* can you take this from her*!? If you believe so much in your own power, then negate it, you mutant who thinks he's a hero!*"

Kamijou gave a slight smile at the words Stiyl had beat him back with before.

The world had changed enough that he could smile at it.

"I don't just think I'm a hero."

Still smiling, he removed the white bandages thoroughly wrapped around his right hand.

It was as if he was removing a seal from the hand.

“I will *be* the hero.”

He spoke, he smiled, and he pressed his battered right hand against Index’s forehead.

While he said it could negate even the systems of god, he had thought that it was a useless right hand that would not let him defeat even a single delinquent, would not raise his scores on tests, and would not make him popular with girls.

But there was one thing it could do.

If it could save the girl who was suffering before his very eyes, it held a most wonderful power.

...

...

...?

“.....Huh?”

Nothing happened. Nothing at all happened.

There was no light or noise, but had the magic the church had put on Index been negated? No, Index was still grimacing like she was in pain. It certainly seemed like nothing had happened.

Kamijou looked puzzled and touched her on the cheek and the back of the head, but nothing happened. Nothing changed. Nothing changed, but he did remember something.

Kamijou had already touched Index a few times.

For instance, he had touched her all over when carrying her from the dorm building after punching out Stiyl. When Index had revealed her identity from within the futon, Kamijou had lightly struck her on the forehead. But of course nothing had happened.

Kamijou looked puzzled. He did not think he had been wrong. Also, he doubted there was some supernatural power that his right hand could not negate. In that case...

In that case, was there some part of Index he had not touched?

“.....Ah.”

His mind immediately jumped to a very inappropriate place, but he forced it back on track.

However, he could not think of any other place than that. If it was magic that was afflicting Index and there was no magic Kamijou's right hand could not negate, then he could only think that his right hand had yet to touch it.

But then where was it?

Kamijou looked down at Index's feverish face. Since the magic had to do with memories, would the magic be located on her head or somewhere near her head? If there was a magic circle carved into the inside of her skull, even Kamijou would have to just give up. If it was inside her body, he could not exactly touch it with his finger that was covered in germs, but...

".....Oh."

Kamijou looked at Index's face once more.

Her eyebrows were moving in pain, her eyes were held tightly shut, and her nose was covered in mud-like sweat. Ignoring all that, Kamijou lowered his gaze to her cute lips taking shallow breaths.

Kamijou slipped his right thumb and forefinger between those lips and forced her mouth open.

The back of her throat.

Due to the protection of the skull, that was closer to her brain than the back of her head. Also, people would almost never see it and no one was like to touch it. At the back of her dark red throat was a single eerie mark like something from the horoscopes on TV. The mark was carved in pure black.

"..."

Kamijou narrowed his eyes once, gathered his resolve, and then shoved his hand into the girl's mouth.

Her mouth wriggled like it was a different creature altogether as his fingers slipped inside. The oddly warm saliva wrapped around his fingers. The unsettling feeling of her tongue made Kamijou hesitate for an instant, but he then pressed his fingers in the rest of the way to jab at the back of Index's throat.

It seemed to Kamijou that Index shuddered violently with a powerful urge to vomit.

Kamijou felt a slight shock in his right index finger as if from static electricity.

At the same moment, his right hand was blown forcefully backwards.

“Gah...!?”

A great number of drops of blood dripped onto the futon and tatami mats.

It had felt like his wrist had been shot by a handgun, so Kamijou instinctually looked down at his right hand. The wounds Kanzaki had given him had reopened and fresh blood was audibly dripping down onto the tatami mats.

As he held his hand up before his face, he noticed something beyond it.

As Index lay limply in the futon, her eyes silently opened and they glowed red.

It was not the color of her eyeballs.

Blood red magic circles floating inside her eyes were glowing.

(Not good...!!)

A chill instinctually ran down Kamijou’s spine. He did not even have time to hold his destroyed right hand up.

Index’s eyes glowed a frightening red and something exploded.

With a tremendous shock, Kamijou’s body struck the bookcase. The wooden planks making up the bookcase were smashed apart and all the books thundered down to the floor. An intense pain rushed over Kamijou’s body as if all of his joints had been smashed to pieces along with the bookcase.

Trembling, Kamijou just barely managed to stand back up even as his legs were about to collapse underneath him. The metallic taste of blood was mixed in with the saliva in his mouth.

“Warning: Chapter 3, Verse 2. All barriers for Index Librorum Prohibitorum’s collar from first to third have been breached. Preparing to regenerate...failed. The collar cannot self-regenerate. Switching priority to eliminating the intruder in order to protect the 103,000 archived grimoires.”

Kamijou looked at what lay before him.

Index slowly stood up in an unsettling manner that made it look like she had no bones or joints and was simply a sack filled with jelly. The crimson magic circles in her eyes pierced Kamijou.

While they were technically eyes, Kamijou found it difficult to think of them as such.

They held no human light and no feminine warmth.

Kamijou had seen those eyes before. When the girl's back had been sliced open by Kanzaki and she had collapsed in front of the student dorm, she had spoken about runes like a machine. These were the eyes she had at that time.

"*–I have no magic power, so I can't use it.*"

"...Come to think of it, there was one thing I forgot to ask you," Kamijou muttered under his breath as he clenched his battered right fist. "*If you're not an esper, why is it you have no magic power*?"

The answer to that question was most likely what lay before him. The Church had prepared multiple layers of security. If someone found out about the secret of her perfect memory and tried to remove the collar, Index would automatically use her 103,000 grimoires to use the powerful magic held within in order to literally keep the person who knew the truth from saying anything ever again. All of Index's magic power was put into running that auto defense system.

"Using the 103,000 archived grimoires to determine the magic spell used to damage the barrier...failed. The specified magic cannot be determined. Putting together an anti-intruder local weapon to expose the composition of the spell." Index tilted her head like she was a corpse being controlled via strings. "The magic expected to be most effective on the specific intruder has been put together. Proceeding to activate the special magic known as St. George's Sanctuary to destroy the intruder."

With a tremendous noise, the two magic circles in Index's eyes grew all at once. Two magic circles over two meters across were now positioned in front of Index's face. Each was fixed in place with its center over one of her eyes, so the magic circles would move through the air even when she slightly moved her head.

"..."

Index sang something that was beyond human comprehension.

For an instant, the two magic circles centered on her eyes glowed before exploding. More specifically, it seemed like an explosion of high voltage electricity occurred in a point in space between Index's eyes, and lightning scattered in every direction.

However, rather than bluish-white electricity, the lightning looked pitch black.

It is a very unscientific description, but it looked like space itself had cracked open. Centered on the point where the two magic circles crossed, pitch black cracks in space itself spread out in all directions and to the edges of the room.

It was like a window that had been shot by a bullet. It almost looked like a type of barrier preventing anyone from getting near Index.

Something that seemed to be pulsating swelled up from within the cracks.

A beast-like scent wafted in from the slight opening created by the pitch black cracks.

“Ah.”

Kamijou suddenly knew.

This was not based on theory or logic. Nor was it based on reason or sense. Something like his base instincts were shouting it at him. He did not know what exactly the thing within the cracks was. However, he knew that seeing it – viewing it directly and honestly – would be enough to destroy the being that was Kamijou Touma.

“Ah.”

Kamijou trembled.

The cracks spread and spread and spread and spread. Even though he knew whatever was within was approaching, he could not move. He trembled, he trembled some more, and he truly did tremble. After all...

He just had to defeat whatever that was.

He and he alone had the hand that could save Index.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

And that was why he trembled with delight.

Was he afraid? Of course not. After all, he had been waiting for this moment for so long.

While he said it could negate even the systems of god, his hand was so useless it would not let him defeat even a single delinquent, would not raise his scores on tests, and would not make him popular with girls.

When a girl’s back had been sliced open due to him, when he had been forced to leave the apartment so as not to interfere with the recovery magic, and when the wire-using samurai girl had beaten him within an inch of his life, he had cursed his own powerlessness while wishing all the while that he could save that girl!

It was not that he particularly wanted to become the hero of this story.

It was just that he held the power in his right hand to negate and tear this too-cruel story to pieces!

He was only four meters away.

If he touched that girl just once more, he could bring it all to an end!

That was why Kamijou ran toward the cracks and toward Index who stood beyond them.

He clenched his right fist.

He clenched it so he could negate the never-ending and horribly, horribly boring ending to that cruel story.

At the same time, the cracks spread all at once and “opened”.

It looked as painful as a virgin’s hymen being forcibly ripped open. The giant cracks opened wide enough to reach the edges of the room and the “thing” inside peered out.

A pillar of light shot from within the cracks.

It looked something like a laser beam about a meter across. The light was so pure a white it looked like it had been melted by the sun. The instant it shot out at him, Kamijou thrust his battered right hand out in front of his face.

The sound of the impact was like a piece of meat being pressed against a hot metal sheet.

However, there was no pain. And no heat. Like it was a pillar of water coming from a fire hose that was being repelled by a clear wall, the pillar of light scattered in every direction when it struck Kamijou’s right hand.

Even so, the pillar of light itself was not completely negated.

Just like with Stiyl’s Innocentius, it seemed to have no end no matter how often he negated it. His feet planted on the tatami mats were pushed slowly backwards and his right hand felt like it would be blown away by the great pressure.

(No...That isn’t...what this is...!!)

Kamijou grabbed his right wrist with his empty left hand. He felt a stinging pain in the palm of his right hand. *The magic was eating into it.* His right hand could not deal with it fast enough, so the pillar of light was approaching millimeter by millimeter.

(This isn’t just a large mass! Each individual piece of light is something different!!)

It was possible Index was using her 103,000 grimoires to use 103,000 different types of magic at the same time. Each individual grimoire held instant death and she was using them all at once.

Suddenly, Kamijou heard some noise from the other side of the apartment.

(Have they only now noticed something's wrong?)

The door swung open and the two magicians charged in.

“Dammit, what are you doing!? You're *still* struggling in-...!?”

Stiyl started to shout, but his breath caught in his throat like he had been punched in the back. The sight of the pillar of light and of Index who had fired it made him look like his heart had stopped.

Kanzaki, who had seemed so superior and powerful before, looked utterly taken aback by the scene displayed before her.

“D-Dragon Breath? It can't be. And how is she using magic!?”

Kamijou did not turn around.

While it was true he was hardly in a situation where he *could* turn around, it had more to do with him not wanting to take his eyes off of Index.

“Hey, do you know what this pillar of light is!?” And so he shouted at them without turning around. “What's it called? What is it!? What's its weakness!? What should I do? Explain each and every step from start to finish!!”

“...But...but...what is...?”

“God, you piss me off! Isn't it obvious!? If Index is using magic, that means the Church was lying when they told you Index couldn't use magic!” Kamijou shouted while blowing away the pillar of light. “Oh, and that whole thing about Index having to have her memories erased every year? That was another lie! The Church was the one limiting her, so if I negate this thing, you won't have to erase her memories anymore!!”

Kamijou's feet slowly but surely slid backwards.

The power behind the pillar of light nightmarishly doubled as if to rip up his toes that were digging into the tatami mat.

“Calm down! Calm down and think about this rationally! Do you really think the people who created the cruel system behind Index would kindly tell their subordinates the whole truth of the situation!? Look at the reality before your eyes! Ask Index herself if you like!!”

The two magicians blankly stared at Index who stood beyond the cracks.

“St. George’s Sanctuary is showing no effect against the intruder. Switching to another spell and continuing destruction of the intruder in order to protect the collar.”

That was clearly not the Index the two magicians knew.

That was clearly an Index the Church had not told them about.

“...”

For an instant – just an instant – Stiyl gritted his teeth so hard it seemed they would crack.

“...Fortis931.”

Tens of thousands of cards flew from within his pitch black clothes.

Cards carved with flame runes spiraled around like a typhoon and in no time at all had covered the walls, ceiling, and floor without gap. It was just like Hoichi the Earless.

However, he was not acting in order to save Kamijou.

In an effort to save the girl named Index, Stiyl pressed his hand against Kamijou’s back.

“I do not need any vague possibilities. As long as I can erase her memories, I can save her life *for now*. I will kill anyone to accomplish that. I will destroy anything! That is what I decided long ago.”

Kamijou’s feet that had been sliding further and further back suddenly stopped.

An unbelievable power caused the tatami mats his toes were digging into to creak horribly.

“*For now*?” Kamijou did not turn around. “To hell with that. I don’t care about anything like that! I don’t need reasons or logic! Just answer me one thing, magicians!!”

Kamijou sucked in a breath before continuing.

“Do you want to save Index or not?”

The magicians stopped breath.

“You’ve been waiting for this the whole time, haven’t you? You’ve been waiting for a solution where Index doesn’t have to lose her memories and you don’t have to make an enemy of her, right!? This is that kind of wonderful, wonderful happy ending that anyone would want and where everyone is happy!”

An unpleasant noise came from his right wrist as he continued to force it against the pillar of light.

Even so, Kamijou did not give up.

“You’ve always longed for this turn of events, haven’t you!? You aren’t filling in until the hero shows up! You aren’t buying time until the main character can appear! There’s no one else! There’s nothing else! Didn’t you swear to save that girl with your own two hands!?”

A crack ran down the fingernail of his right index finger and red blood flowed out.

Even so, Kamijou did not give up.

“You’ve always, always wanted to be the heroes, right!? You wanted to become the kind of magicians you find in picture books and movies that risk their lives to save the girl, right!? Then this isn’t anywhere near over!! It hasn’t even begun!! Don’t fall into despair just because the prologue dragged on a bit too long!!”

The magicians’ voices were silenced.

Kamijou would not give up. What did he look like in the magicians’ eyes?

“*If you stretch out your hand, you can reach it! Just do it already, magicians*!”

An odd cracking noise came from Kamijou’s right pinky.

When he realized the finger was bent – broken – at an unnatural angle, the pillar of light attacked with tremendous force and finally knocked Kamijou’s right hand away.

His hand was knocked a good ways back.

Kamijou’s face was completely defenseless and the pillar of light rushed towards it at a dreadful speed.

“...Salvere000!!”

The instant before the pillar of light struck his face, he heard Kanzaki yell that.

It was not Japanese. He had never heard the word before. However, he had heard a similar word...no, a similar name once before. It had been during his confrontation with Stiyl at the dorm. He had said it was the name he must give when he used magic. His magic name.

Kanzaki's around two meter long Japanese sword sliced through the air. Her Nanasen attack using seven wires flew towards Index at a speed that seemed to slice through sound itself.

But she was not aiming for Index.

The wires tore through the fragile tatami mat at Index's feet. Having lost her footing, Index fell backwards. The magic circles linked to her eyes moved and the pillar of light that was supposed to be aiming for Kamijou missed its target by quite a bit.

As if it was a giant sword being swung around, the pillar of light sliced through the wall and ceiling of the apartment. It even sliced through the pitch black clouds floating in the night sky. In fact, it could have even sliced through a satellite outside the atmosphere.

Not even a splinter remained where the walls and ceiling had been sliced.

Instead, the portions that had been destroyed had become feathers of light that were as pure a white as the pillar of light. They came floating down. Kamijou had no idea what effects they might have, but a few dozen of those feathers of light came floating down like winter snow on that summer night.

"Those are the same as Dragon Breath, the strike of the legendary dragon of St. George! Whatever power they may have, I highly doubt the human body would react well to them!"

Having heard Kanzaki's warning and having been freed from the bonds of the pillar of light, Kamijou ran towards Index as she lay collapsed on the ground.

But before he could, Index turned her head.

Like a giant sword being swung, the pillar of light was swung back down, slicing back through the night sky.

Kamijou was going to be caught by it again!

"Innocentius!"

As Kamijou prepared himself, a spiral of flame appeared in front of him.

The giant flame took on the form of a person and then spread out its arms to act as a shield against the pillar of light.

It was truly like a cross protecting man from sin.

“Go, esper!” shouted Stiyl. “Her time limit has already passed! If you want to do this, don’t waste even a second!!”

Kamijou did not respond in words or even turn around.

Before he could, he ran around the colliding flame and light and then towards Index. He did it because Stiyl wanted him to. He did it because he had heard Stiyl’s words and understood the meaning held in them and the feelings hidden behind them.

Kamijou ran.

He ran!!

“Warning: Chapter 6, Verse 13. New enemy confirmed. Changing combat considerations. Beginning scan of the battlefield...done. Focusing on the destruction of the most difficult enemy, Kamijou Touma.”

Index swung her head around, pillar of light and all.

But Innocentius moved to protect Kamijou at the same time. The light and the flames continued to eat into each other in an extended conflict of destruction and regeneration.

Kamijou ran straight for the now defenseless Index.

Four more meters.

Three more meters.

Two more meters!

One more meter!!

“Nooo!! Above you!!” Kanzaki yelled with a voice that seemed to tear through everything.

Kamijou had just reached the point where he could reach the magic circles in front of Index’s face if he stretched out his hand. Without stopping his feet, he looked up at the ceiling.

The feathers of light.

The few dozen shining feathers that had been created when Index’s pillar of light had destroyed the wall and ceiling were slowly floating down like snowflakes. They had just floated down far enough to be about to reach Kamijou’s head.

Despite not knowing anything about magic, Kamijou could still tell that having even one of those feathers touch him would be very, very bad.

He also knew that he could easily negate them by using his right hand.

But...

“Warning: Chapter 22, Verse 1. Analysis of the flame magic spell has succeeded. It is confirmed to be a distorted Christian motif described with runes. Adding in anti-Christian spells...Spell 1, Spell 2, Spell 3. Twelve seconds until the complete activation of the spell named Eli Eli Lema Sabachthani.”

The pillar of light’s color turned from pure white to crimson.

Innocentius’s regeneration speed visibly slowed and the pillar of light pushed forward.

Using his right hand to take out each and every one of the dozens of feathers of light would most likely take too much time. There was a danger of Index managing to stand back up and, most importantly, Innocentius clearly wouldn’t last that long.

The dozens of feathers of light floating above or the single girl at his feet who was being controlled and whose every feeling was being used.

It was a simple question of who to save and who to let fall.

The answer was obvious.

Kamijou Touma had not been swinging his right hand around for his own sake.

He had been fighting the magicians in order to save a certain girl.

(God, if this world, this story, is moving ahead according to the system you created...)

Kamijou spread open the five fingers of his clenched fist almost as if he were going to wash his palm.

(...then I first need to destroy that illusion!!)

Kamijou swung his right hand down.

He swung it down on the black cracks and the magic circles that had produced those cracks.

Kamijou’s right hand easily tore them apart.

It was so easy it made him want to laugh at how much suffering they had caused.

He broke through them as easily as the paper of a goldfish scoop once it was wet.

"...Warning: Final...Chapter, Verse Zero... The collar has received fatal...damage... Regeneration...impossible...gone."

The voice coming from Index's mouth ended altogether.

The pillar of light disappeared, the magic circles were gone, and it was almost as if the cracks that had been running all across the room had been erased with an eraser.

At that time, one of the feathers of light fell down on Kamijou Touma's head.

He thought he heard someone shout.

He did not know whether it had been Stiyl, Kanzaki, himself, or even Index who might have woken up.

As if he had been hit in the head with a hammer, all strength left his entire body down to the very last finger.

Kamijou fell down covering up Index who was still collapsed on the floor.

It was almost as if he were protecting her body from the falling feathers of light.

The dozens of feathers of light floated down like snowflakes towards every part of Kamijou's body.

Even so, Kamijou Touma smiled.

He smiled and he never moved those fingertips again.

On that night, Kamijou Touma "died".

EPILOGUE

The Conclusion of the Index of Prohibited Books Girl.

Index-Librorum-Prohibitorum.

"Seems it was nothing," said a plump doctor in an examination room in a university hospital.

The doctor spun around in a swiveling chair. He must have been aware he resembled a frog because he had a sticker of a small tree frog on the ID card on his chest.

Index may have had a great love for humanity, but scientists were the one group she did not care for.

While magicians were indeed a collection of oddities, she felt scientists were even odder.

She wondered why she was alone with him, but without anyone to be with, she had no choice.

Yes, she had no one to be with.

"I don't like speaking so politely to someone who isn't my patient, so I'm going to stop. This is my first and last question to you as a doctor: Why did you come here to my hospital?"

Not even Index knew the answer to that question.

No one – truly no one – had told her the truth.

She did not like having magicians who she thought were her enemies to tell her about the yearly wipe of her memories or about how a certain boy had risked his life to save her from those horrible circumstances.

"But having three people in Academy City without an ID is quite a surprise. Did you know a strange beam shot down one of our surveillance satellites which has left Judgment quite busy?"

(That wasn't your first and last question at all.)

Index was one of the three without an ID. The other two were likely those magicians. Despite having chased her all over the place, they had brought her to the hospital and then disappeared without a trace.

"By the way, that letter you have there is from *them*, isn't it?"

The frog-faced doctor was looking at the envelope in Index's hand that looked like it could hold even a love letter.

With an angry look, Index ripped the envelope apart and took out the letter.

"Oh? I thought it was addressed to that boy, not you."

"It doesn't matter," replied Index indignantly.

Since the letter was sent by "Stiyl Magnus" and started with "Dear Kamijou Touma", it was simply too suspicious. A deadly malice could be felt from the heart sticker on the envelope.

At any rate, the letter read...

Any standard greetings would be a waste of time, so I'm skipping them.

Now you've done it, you bastard...and I'd like to go on like that, but if I threw all my personal feelings at you here, I would end up using up all the trees in the world and still not have enough paper for this letter. As such, I'll end that there, you bastard.

It went on like that for eight pages of stationery. Index silently and carefully read through it all, crushing up each page she finished and tossing it behind her. The doctor's frog face grew more and more annoyed with each new balled-up page littering the floor of his workplace, but he could not say anything to Index who was emitting the odd intimidation of a bullied child on the verge of tears.

And on the ninth and final page, the following was written:

For now, I will do the bare minimum of what etiquette demands of me for your help and explain about that girl and her circumstances. I can't have either of us owing each other anything. The next time we meet, we are sure to be enemies.

We don't trust you scientists, so we examined her in our own way before the doctors saw her, and she seems to be fine. The higher ups in the Anglican Church seem to want to retrieve her as soon as possible now that her collar has been removed, but I think a more wait-and-see approach would be better. Although personally I cannot stand to have her with you for even an instant longer.

However, she used magic based on the 103,000 grimoires when in the John's Pen mode the Church prepared. Now that John's Pen has been destroyed, it is possible she can

use magic of her own free will now. If the destruction of John's Pen has caused her magic power to recover, we must reorganize our strength.

That said, I don't see how her magic power could have realistically recovered. It's hardly worth warning you about, but a Magic God that can freely use those 103,000 grimoires is just that dangerous.

(By the way, this does not mean we have given up and are leaving her to you. Once we have gathered the information we need and gathered the equipment we need, we intend to come back to take that girl again. I don't like catching people off guard, so make sure you prepare yourself for our arrival.)

P.S. This letter is made to self-destruct after it has been read. Even if you had realized the truth, you need to be punished for making that bet without consulting us. I hope this blows off a finger or two of that precious right hand of yours.

After all that, one of Stiyl's runes was carved into the paper.

As soon as Index frantically threw the letter away, it burst into pieces with a crackling noise.

"You seem to have some rather extreme friends. Did they soak the letter in a liquid explosive?"

The fact that the letter exploding did not surprise the doctor made Index half-seriously think he was a bit crazy himself.

However, Index's feelings seemed to have numbed over too because no other thoughts entered her mind.

As such, she decided to do what she had come to the hospital to do in the first place.

"If you want to know about that boy, it would be fastest to just meet with him directly...Or so I'd like to say." The frog-faced doctor truly seemed to be enjoying himself. "It would be rude for you to receive the shock before the boy himself, so how about a quick lesson beforehand?"

♦

She knocked on the door twice.

That was all she did, but Index still felt like her heart was going to burst. While waiting for a response, she restlessly wiped the sweat from her palms onto the skirt of her habit and crossed herself.

"Yes?" replied the boy.

Index brought her hand to the door but then hesitated because he had not actually told her to come in and she wondered if she should ask before doing so. But she was afraid of having him say something like "God, you're persistent. Just come in already." She was very, very afraid.

She opened the door jerkily like she was a robot. Instead of a hospital room with six patients to the room, it was a private room. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all pure white which threw off her sense of distance, making the room seem oddly large.

The boy sat up in a pure white bed.

The window next to the bed was open and the pure white curtain fluttered a bit.

He was alive.

That truth alone almost brought tears to Index's eyes. She was unsure if she should leap into his arms right then and there or if she should first give his head a good chomp for being so reckless.

"Um..." said the boy with a quizzical look on his face and bandages wrapped around his head like a headband.

"*Did you go to the wrong room by any chance?*"

The boy's words were the polite and doubtful words of someone probing for information.

It was the voice of someone who had just received a phone call from a complete stranger.

"*—This was less amnesia and more a case of complete memory destruction.*"

The words the doctor had told Index in that freezing summer examination room floated up in the back of her mind.

"*—He did not just "forget" his memories. The brain cells were physically destroyed. I really don't see how he could remember those things again. Honestly, did someone open up his skull and jam a stun gun inside?*"

"..."

Index's breathing stopped. She could not help but lower her gaze.

Serious damage had been done to the boy's brain as a reaction to his forced overuse of his esper powers and as damage from the light Index herself had fired. (Or so she had heard. She did not remember it herself.)

Since it was physical damage – that is, just a wound – healing it might have been possible with recovery magic like with Index's sliced open back. However, that

transparent boy had a right hand called Imagine Breaker. It would negate all magic whether it was for good or evil.

In other words, even if she tried to heal the boy, that recovery magic would be negated.

It all came to the boy's mind and heart being dead rather than his body.

"Umm?"

The boy's voice sounded unsure...no, worried.

For some reason, Index could not allow that transparent boy to speak like that.

The boy had been hurt for her sake. It was not fair for him to then be worried about her.

Index forced down whatever it was that was gathering in her heart and then took a deep breath.

She tried to smile and thought she might have managed.

The boy was transparent through and through, so it was clear he did not remember Index at all.

"Um, are you okay? You look really sad."

That transparent boy smashed her perfect smile to pieces all at once. Index recalled that the boy had always seemed able to see the true emotions hidden behind her smiles.

"I'm perfectly okay." Index worked to keep her breathing steady. "Of course I'm okay."

The transparent boy studied Index's face for a bit.

"...Um. Did we know each other by any chance?"

That question was the hardest one for Index to bear.

It proved that the transparent boy knew nothing about her.

Nothing. Truly nothing.

"Yes..." replied Index as she stood in the middle of the hospital room. Her body language was similar to an elementary school student in a manga who had been sent to stand out in the hall for forgetting her homework.

"Touma, you don't remember? We met on your dorm balcony."

"...I live in a dorm?"

"...Touma, you don't remember? You destroyed my Walking Church with your right hand."

"What's a Walking Church? ...Is it some kind of new jogging religion?"

"......Touma, you don't remember? You fought magicians for me."

"Is Touma someone's name?"

Index felt like she could not go on speaking for much longer.

"Touma, you don't remember?"

Even so, she had to ask one last thing.

"How much Index...loved you."

"I'm sorry," said the transparent boy. "And what is Index? It doesn't sound like a person's name. Do I have a cat or a dog?"

"Weh..."

Index felt the urge to cry rise up as high as her chest.

But she crushed that urge and forced it down.

She forced it down and smiled. It was hardly a perfect smile, but she did at least manage a crumbling smile.

"Just kidding! You totally fell for it! Ah ha ha ha!!"

"Hweh...?"

Index froze in place.

The unsure expression left the transparent boy's face. It was completely swapped out for a fierce and incredibly evil smile with bared canines.

"Why are you getting so emotional over being called a dog or cat, you masochist? What, are you into things like collars or something? C'mon, I have no intention of having this end with me revealing a secret interest in kidnapping and confining little girls."

At some point, color had filled the transparent boy.

Index did not understand why. She thought she was imagining things, so she rubbed her eyes. She thought she was hearing things, so she cleared out her ears. It felt like her perfectly sized habit had somehow become too big so one shoulder was about to slip off.

"Huh? Eh? Touma? Huh? I was told your brain cells had been destroyed so you forgot everything..."

"...C'mon now. Don't make it sound like it would've been better if I had." Kamijou sighed. "You really are slow. It's true I chose to take those feathers of light at the very, very end. I'm no magician, so I have no idea what effects they had, but according to the doctor, my brain cells were damaged. As such, I was supposed to have amnesia, right?"

"You were *supposed* to?"

"*Yup. After all, that damage was done by magic power, right*?"

"Ah," said Index as she realized something.

"That's right, that's it, and you've got it. Is three times enough? That made things simple. I just touched my own head with my right hand and used Imagine Breaker on myself."

"Ahh..." Index weakly sat down on the floor.

"Basically, I just had to negate the *magical* damage before it could reach my brain and do permanent damage there. If it was more like a physical phenomenon like Stiyl's flames, that would never have worked, but those feathers of light were nothing more than a strange supernatural power, so there was no problem."

It was the same as how a bomb would not explode even if its fuse was lit so long as the fuse was cut before it reached the bomb.

Before the damage running through Kamijou's body could reach his brain, he had negated that damage itself.

It sounded ridiculous.

It sounded absolutely ridiculous, but that boy's Imagine Breaker could negate even the rules created by god.

As Index sat on the floor in a daze with her legs bent backwards to either side, she looked up at Kamijou's face. Now she was sure, the shoulder of her absolute nun's habit had indeed slipped down. Her expression was just as stupid looking.

"Ha ha ha. Man, you should've seen your face. With how you always have everyone volunteer for your sake, I hope this incident has taught you something."

"..."

Index was unable to respond.

“...Huh? ...Um.”

Kamijou grew a bit unsure of himself and the tone of his voice dropped.

Index slowly lowered her head and her long silver bangs covered her expression.

As she sat on the floor, her shoulders trembled slightly. It seemed she was gritting her teeth.

With an unpleasant tone in his voice, Kamijou went back to probing for information.

“Um, there is one thing I would like to ask. May I ask it, princess?”

“What?” replied Index.

“Um...Are you angry by any chance?”

♦

The nurse call rang.

The scream of a boy who had been bitten on the top of the head rang throughout the hospital.

♦

Looking a perfect fit for some angry sound effects, Index left the hospital room.

“Oh?” said a voice near the entrance. The frog-faced doctor entered just as Index was exiting and he had almost bumped into her. “I came because the nurse call went off, but...Oh, now this is bad.”

The boy’s upper body had slipped from the bed and he cried while holding the top of his head with both hands.

“I’m gonna die. I’m really gonna die,” he muttered to himself with such realism that it was frightening.

The doctor glanced back towards the open door to the hallway before turning back to Kamijou.

“Should you really have done that?”

“Done what?” replied the boy.

“You don’t remember anything, do you?”

The transparent boy fell silent.

The reality that god had created was not as kind and warm as what he had told that girl.

As a result of the magic that had afflicted them, the boy and girl had collapsed in the apartment and the two naming themselves magicians had brought them to the hospital. Those supposed magicians had told the doctors what had transpired and the doctors had of course not believed them. The doctors had only told the boy all of that because they felt he had the right to know.

To him, it had been like reading someone else’s diary.

It did not matter to him what someone else’s diary said about a girl he could not picture in his head or recognize if he saw her.

What he had told her had been nothing more than something he had made up based on what someone else’s diary had said.

Even if it said that right hand that was wrapped in bandages held a power that could destroy even the rules created by god...

He did not really believe it.

“But should I really have done that?” said the transparent boy.

Even though it had been someone else’s diary, it had been so enjoyable...and so heartbreaking.

His missing memories would never come back, but he had somehow managed to think of that as a very sad thing.

“For some reason, I did not want to make that girl cry. That was how I felt. I don’t know what kind of feeling it was and I’ll probably never remember, but that was how I felt all the same.” The transparent boy gave a truly colorless smile. “Doctor, why did you believe that story? I mean, being a doctor is about as far as you can get from things like magicians and magic.”

“Not necessarily.” A proud look appeared on the doctor’s frog-like face. “Hospitals and the occult have a surprisingly close relationship. ...And I’m not talking about ghosts haunting hospitals. Depending on their religion, some people refuse to take blood transfusions, refuse surgery, and will sue you even though you saved their life. For a doctor, it is best to just do what the patient says when it comes to the occult.”

The doctor smiled.

He did not know why he was smiling. When he saw the boy smile, he instinctually smiled back like he was a mirror image of the boy.

Or perhaps it was the boy that was a mirror of the doctor.

That was just how hollow the boy's smile was. It was like he could not even feel sorrow.

The boy was really, truly transparent.

"I may still remember more than you think."

The frog-faced doctor looked at the transparent boy in slight surprise.

"Your memories were 'killed', brain cells and all."

(What a ridiculous thing for me to say,) thought the doctor.

But he continued.

"To liken the human body to a computer, your hard disk was utterly fried. If there is no data left in your brain, just where are these memories supposed to be?"

Somehow, the doctor felt the boy's response would blow that ridiculous logic away.

"Isn't that obvious?" replied the transparent boy. "In my heart."

AFTERWORD

Nice to meet you. This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Right about now, I'm starting to feel incredibly embarrassed about referring to myself with a penname. To people who have done things online: it's a bit like revealing your handle to the world for the first time.

Come to think of it, this book got its start online.

The magicians in RPGs and such that can create balls of fire or revive the dead at the cost of some MP are quite convenient, because the term "magic" lets them do whatever they want. But (for the sake of argument) let's assume magic actually existed. What kinds of people used magic throughout history? What kinds of rules exist behind the term "magic"? This all started when I typed "magician" and "actually exist" into a search engine in an attempt to answer those questions.

It came up with things like "how to control a black cat with silver vine powder" and "voodoo witch doctors used fugu poison to create zombies that had a state of apparent death". I got interested when I realized that the workings of the occult seemed an awful lot like science.

Dengeki Bunko's light novels treat magic like it's normal, so I thought that a novel that went deeper into the idea of magic might be a new idea.

...Really, this is a work that was more about my personal interest rather than an idea marketed to a certain type of reader (that is, I didn't try to come up with some catchy topic). My bowed head will never be raised when in front of my editor Miki-san and my illustrator Haimura Kiyotaka-san who both stuck with me on this. I am truly thankful.

And to you readers who picked this book up, I am very grateful that you stuck with my long, drawn-out writing style for this long.

I hope that Kamijou Touma and Index will live just a little longer in your hearts.

And I pray that I will get to make a second volume.

For today, I lay down my pen.

...It's actually still December 26, 2003.

-Kamachi Kazuma